



**Contradictions in Women's Education: Traditionalism, Careerism, and Community at a Single-Sex College.** Barbara J. Bank with Harriet M. Yelon. Sociology of Education Series. Aaron M. Pallas, series ed. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003. 208 pp.

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*Contradictions in Women's Education* contributes substantially to current understandings of women's collegiate experiences. It points to the historical tensions involved in women's participation in higher education, and considers whether those tensions have remained stable or flexible dependent on time and context. Through a six-year longitudinal case study utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods, Barbara Bank and Harriet Yelon offer unique insight into Central Women's College, a small, non-elite institution in the central United States. Specifically, they examine the tensions associated with the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations of college women regarding traditional gender roles, career ambitions, and integration into college life.

The major strengths of this text are: (1) use of a variety of research methods; (2) clear acknowledgement of context in shaping women students' experiences; (3) identification of complexities associated with women's experiences at CWC and, more broadly, in the research literature on women's colleges, sorority involvement, and college student retention; and (4) analyses of the ways in which women's colleges are or are not-"women-centered," as considered through data collected at CWC.

First, this case study uses research methods that thoroughly assess numerous facets of women's experiences at CWC. Bank and Yelon's mixed methods approach suggests careful investigation of all available data. Their presentation of both significant and non-significant findings enhances the text's validity and trustworthiness. Second, Bank and Yelon clearly acknowledge the importance of context in shaping their study. While such an acknowledgement is expected in case study research, this text explicitly considers multiple aspects of CWC's campus culture, examines how the unique context might have shaped research findings, and most importantly, re-integrates the findings into existing literature to suggest that students' behaviors at non-elite women's colleges should not be assumed to mirror behaviors of students at other institutions. Third, this text identifies important complexities associated with women students' experiences in college. Bank and Yelon offer no "quick fix" to questions about sorority involvement, retention measures, or social integration. Indeed, they suggest that some institutional characteristics function both to retain and



alienate students. Due to their mixed methods approach, Bank and Yelon are able to present rich data related to students' competing perceptions of their experiences at CWC. Their findings emphasize that no administrative decision, classroom pedagogy, or residence hall policy fits the needs of all students. Instead, acknowledgement and negotiation of the tensions caused by competing interpretations of campus policies and practices are imperative.

A fourth strength is found in the final chapter. At the time this study was completed, CWC was in the process of transforming itself into a co-educational institution. The rhetoric used by the college president to support the move included three assertions: (1) that the institution would not really change; (2) that CWC would remain "women-centered;" and, (3) that the move was necessary to increase diversification of the campus for the good of the students. These often times competing arguments provide a scaffolding through which to analyze the extent to which this campus rhetoric reflected the reality of students' experiences at CWC. Particularly valuable is the discussion of how women's colleges have the potential to be truly women-centered, and how they can fall well short of what such terminology would suggest.

Other aspects of the text limit its usefulness. While an important discussion of heterosexism is incorporated into the text, it comes well after analyses related to family, and relations with men and other women, are introduced. As such, it does not seem to inform previous analyses. Second, while the book acknowledges "collegiate culture" as an important aspect of students' lives, it fails to clarify exactly how the authors defined that term. Instead, the concept is used in various ways and obscures potentially important findings. Third, it would have been useful to provide additional data regarding methods, especially qualitative methods. It was unclear how the researchers themselves were integrated into the campus, or how they developed relationships with participants. It was also unclear how the interviewees were chosen. Finally, perhaps because the rest of the text is so thorough in acknowledging complexity associated with the findings, I was surprised that Bank and Yelon elected not to highlight instances when qualitative and quantitative data contradicted each other. These contradictions are often instrumental in identifying important constructs that may be unique to a given context.

Due to its important strengths, many people will find this book informative and useful. Specifically, student affairs professionals will benefit from actively wrestling with how the findings from CWC's campus would apply on their campus. Several of the findings challenge assumptions often made about college student retention, sorority involvement, or college student involvement more broadly defined. In calling attention to context, Bank and Yelon offer insight, although not answers, to professionals whose campuses are dissimilar from those institutions on which much



research is based (either research institutions or elite liberal arts institutions). Further, administrators and other faculty interested in serving women students will benefit from grappling with the questions posed here. Finally, scholars interested in women's education are sure to benefit from this book in many ways. More broadly, scholars interested in retention, college choice, social integration, as well as norms and values as they are defined in college, will also find compelling data and analyses.

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