

# Women's Status in Higher Education: Background and Significance

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**P**OLICY INITIATIVES, CURRICULAR REFORM, RESEARCH, and grassroots organizing have all contributed to advancing equity and shaping women's status in U.S. higher education. Nearly four or more decades have passed since key legislation, including the Equal Pay Act, Title VII, and Title IX, was passed and efforts were begun to broaden and create more inclusive curricula. Significant gains have been made in women's access to and representation in higher education as evidenced by enrollment figures and graduation rates. Yet these measures are only part of the full gender equity picture. For instance, when taken in the aggregate, enrollment data do not portray the persistent lack of gender parity among students studying engineering, computer science, and other science and technology fields, nor do they depict the quality of classroom and campus experiences. Even today, data reveal that women studying and working in postsecondary institutions bump up against glass ceilings and sticky floors, experience pay disparities linked to gender, and experience the threat and reality of sexual harassment and violence on campus.

Since 1988 more than half of all undergraduate students have been women, and 60 percent of students in graduate and professional programs in 2007–08 were women (King, 2010). These improvements in women's access to and representation in higher education are indeed impressive and worthy of note. Headlines based on these data alone, however—that is, drawing conclusions that equity has been achieved based on the overall proportion of faculty or students who are female—fail to acknowledge ways in which gender representation tends to be stratified across types of institutions and by rank

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and discipline in institutions where women are underrepresented in particular fields, in the ranks of senior faculty in a majority of disciplines, and in senior leadership positions (King, 2010; Touchton, Musil, and Campbell, 2008).

A saying, *the higher the fewer*, continues to convey the current status of women in U.S. higher education as a result of their uneven representation among upper levels of prestige hierarchies in and between postsecondary institutions (Nidiffer, 2002). For instance, the figures pointing to the overall majority of women in graduate programs do not convey that male students remain the majority in both Ph.D. and M.D. programs (King, 2010), nor do they convey that women are more likely to be represented among faculty and leadership of community colleges and comprehensive four-year institutions than they are among the faculty and leadership share of elite research universities. Further, regardless of institutional type, women continue to hold fewer full professor positions than assistant professor and lecturer posts (Touchton, Musil and Campbell, 2008), and only 41 percent of women faculty were tenured compared with 55 percent of their male colleagues (Snyder, Dillow, and Hoffman, 2008). Female academic administrators are more likely to be located in female-dominated disciplines with lower status and lower salaries. In fact, community colleges are the only arena where women have attained parity (52 percent) as senior administrators. At research universities, women hold only 34 percent of senior administrative posts (King and Gomez, 2008).

Further, the numbers alone (whether aggregated or disaggregated) do not convey how women continue to report working and studying in climates that privilege masculine perspectives and approaches to organizing and leading that tend to disadvantage women (Martínez Alemán, 2008; Bornstein, 2008; Cooper and Stevens, 2002; Eddy and Cox, 2008; Glazer-Raymo, 2008a; Mason, Goulden, and Frasch, 2009; Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall, 1996; Valian, 1999). Climate-related issues like these along with complexities associated with demographic differences like race, sexual identity, and socioeconomic status among women all contribute to shaping women's experiences in higher education and therefore should be considered when assessing progress toward gender equity.

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## Guiding Assumptions and Questions

This monograph emerges from the premise that discrimination on the basis of one's sex, gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or ethnicity is harmful to advancing a civil society where all citizens have opportunities to contribute to their fullest potential. As microcosms of society, postsecondary institutions reflect, resist, and contribute to shaping norms of the larger culture in which they are situated. Lack of equity in higher education can have far-reaching and negative consequences for learning environments, quality of life, and career satisfaction of both women and men studying and working in academic institutions. Further, changes made (or not made) to promote equity in higher education can be of consequence beyond colleges and universities as administrators, faculty, and staff support and guide more than 19 million students (in the United States alone), produce knowledge that shapes culture, and engage in service to communities (Ropers-Huilman, 2003a; Snyder and Dillow, 2010).

Understanding social forces that have shaped and continue to shape understandings of culture can sharpen the lenses through which we examine the status of women in higher education and the status of other historically underrepresented groups. Moreover, these lenses can help illuminate complexities and avoid common pitfalls of framing gender equity in overly simplistic ways. For instance, when "women's status" is employed as a concept, it risks being understood in reductionist ways that fail to acknowledge differences among women. In turn, such conceptualizations allow "status" to be defined by issues most salient to white and economically privileged women, who have historically had the most access to the positional power and other privileges needed to shape gender equity agendas in higher education. Working to avoid such pitfalls is an important responsibility for those engaging in this and other conversations about women's status.

My focus on "women's status" in higher education is intended to foreground shared challenges women have faced and continue to face in patriarchal contexts while also acknowledging how race, social class, and other aspects of identity intersect with sex and gender and contribute to shaping one's professional status in profound ways. The purpose of this monograph is to provide a concise

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review of the contemporary status of women in U.S. higher education, including gains made and continuing challenges across diverse groups of women, and to delineate multiple lenses through which to understand and analyze persistent equity problems and strategies to address them. Toward that end, the following key questions are addressed in this and subsequent chapters:

What is the current status of women as students, faculty, and staff in U.S. higher education, including gains made in access, representation, and campus climate?

What are the persistent problems and challenges facing women working and studying in U.S. postsecondary institutions, including those producing disciplinary and occupational segregation?

What salient concepts have been proposed to promote understandings of gender equity?

How do demographic differences among women such as race, sexual identity, disability, age, and socioeconomic status contribute to shaping women's status?

What is feminist theory and how might its diverse frames be particularly helpful in analyzing the complexities of gender equity?

In light of these theoretical frameworks, what are some promising strategies for promoting gender equity in postsecondary institutions?

Responses to these questions provide a focus for both reviewing the literature about women's status in higher education and examining this status and its complexities through the lens of theory.

## Historical Context

The status of women in higher education today is a product of its historical context and the confluence of numerous social and political forces. A number of scholars have expertly delineated histories of women in higher education (see, for example, Chamberlain, 1988; Nidiffer, 2000, 2002, 2010; Solomon, 1985). Drawing from these scholars and others who have described aspects of

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women's participation in U.S. postsecondary education, this chapter proceeds with a brief overview of the context from which our current conditions emerge. This historical context provides an important backdrop for understanding the gains made and continuing challenges for women in higher education today.

According to Nidiffer (2002), the realities for women in U.S. postsecondary education today are “the direct legacy of America’s historical antagonism toward women’s higher learning” (p. 3). The longstanding resistance to girls’ and women’s equal participation in schools and postsecondary institutions is evidence of this antagonism. Such resistance can be traced over centuries. At its inception, the purpose of American higher education, with the founding of Harvard College in 1636, was to prepare young men to become ministers and government leaders. Because society did not view women as suitable to such roles and girls lacked access to collegiate preparatory schools, women were also not considered as potential students in the colonial and most antebellum colleges.

Numerous sociopolitical events and related policy initiatives influenced social acceptance of women’s participation in higher education in the decades following the Civil War. For example, more than seventy years of activism (from the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions presented at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 catalyzing the Suffrage Movement for women to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920) helped to slowly shift the tide toward increasing public acceptance of women’s participation in the civic realm. In addition, the Morrill Act of 1862 broadened public higher education and gradually, as coeducation expanded, provided more options for women seeking postsecondary training. By 1910 women represented 35 percent of all college students and were gaining entry into professional and graduate schools. These gains served to challenge longstanding cultural attitudes about women and often fueled backlash because of the perceived threat to male economic advantage (Nidiffer, 2001; Solomon, 1985). Thus, women’s participation in higher education over the twentieth century ebbed and flowed. In the 1920s nearly half (47 percent) of college students were female, compared with only 30 percent from 1930 to 1950.

My research on university women’s commissions provides a glimpse of how complex social forces contributed to shaping the status of women in U.S. society

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and in higher education during the ensuing decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Since their inception in 1968, university women's commissions have served to document the status, conditions, and positions of women and to recommend policy. The emergence of university women's commissions in the United States followed a pattern of women's commission development that can be traced to the international level with the formation of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 1946. Initially, the primary role of the U.N. commission was to collect information and make recommendations related to women's rights globally. In the early 1960s, the U.N. commission undertook the task of promoting national women's commissions. By 1979 sixty-seven countries reported having some kind of women's commission or government division charged with similar functions (Stewart, 1980).

In the United States, the development of women's commissions stemmed from the first Presidential Commission on the Status of Women established in 1961 by executive order of President John F. Kennedy. The creation of this commission helped serve a number of political interests; it rewarded the many women who had supported Kennedy's campaign while maintaining their support for the next election. Ironically, the creation of this commission was also a means by which the Kennedy administration could deflect support for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Kennedy was indebted to labor interests for his success in the presidential election the previous year, a constituency that strongly opposed the passage of the ERA (Stewart, 1980).

In light of this backdrop, it is not surprising that after twenty-two months of study, the Kennedy administration's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women produced a report concluding that the ERA was unnecessary. Despite this position, however, "the facts, in large part, spoke for themselves and called attention to the unfavorable condition of women in American society" (Stewart, 1980, p.7). The commission report generated institutional spin-offs, including the establishment of forty-five statewide commissions on the status of women within three years. Subsequent administrations followed Kennedy's lead and also appointed commission-like groups that advocated for women's policy concerns, including action on the ERA, enactment, and enforcement of antidiscrimination legislation, and support for new policies related to employment, education, childcare, women's health, pay equity, housing,

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and sexual harassment (Stewart, 1980). Although commissions were met with open hostility at times, it seemed their reports were most often marginalized or completely neglected by the administrations commissioning them (Rosenberg, 1982).

Catalyzed by the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, women's state and local commissions grew in the mid-1960s and proliferated in the 1970s when the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor supported their state-level establishment throughout the U.S. (Stewart, 1980). Although most of these commissions elected to pursue less contentious matters such as supporting educational functions by sponsoring conferences, developing newsletters, and holding hearings; a number of them also served in lobbying and administrative oversight capacities (Rosenberg, 1982). State and local commissions also performed the vital role of establishing networks among women—a condition that was integral to the growth of the women's movement. By 1980 local commissions existed in 150 communities in the United States (Stewart, 1980).

The earliest university women's commissions were formed in 1968 at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Chicago (Freeman, 1973). Although they were not limited to research universities, these institutions in particular initiated commissions on the status of women as a means of responding to demands made by women and to “demonstrate their good faith efforts” toward enhancing the status of women on campus (Glazer-Raymo, 1999, p. 66). Commissions were part of a growing number of women-focused higher education groups, including undergraduate and graduate women's caucuses, consciousness-raising groups, and academic discipline-related groups for women such as Committee W of the American Association of University Professors (Rossi and Calderwood, 1973).

## Legislative and Policy Initiatives

A number of policy initiatives marked changes in societal dispositions and support for women's participation in higher education during the latter part of the twentieth century. For example, the Equal Pay Act mandating equal pay for equal work regardless of sex was passed in 1963, and Title VII of the 1964 Civil

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Rights Act was amended to prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sex. These landmark policies represented major legislative gains in the pursuit of equity. For women, however, the most vital policy instrument to mediate women's relationship with higher education was the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (renamed the Patsy T. Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act in 2002) prohibiting discrimination based on sex in educational programs receiving federal funds and requiring institutional audits.

Title IX emerged from efforts of the Women's Equity Action League, the National Organization for Women, legislators, and academic women throughout the United States whose focused activism was catalyzed by a class action suit filed by Bernice Sandler in 1969 and charging colleges and universities receiving federal funds with gender discrimination. The complaint prompted an outpouring of information and support from women in academia and women's rights groups in general.

Specifically, Title IX provides that "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (Section 1681(a)). Although contemporary media attention to Title IX is most often associated with athletics, its coverage is much more expansive and includes such key issues as employment equity, sexual harassment, admissions, scholarships, pregnancy, and athletics (Somers, 2002).

## **Women in the Curriculum**

Alongside the broader legislative context in the 1960s and 1970s, the academy was undergoing important changes from within that would shape the status of women in higher education in the years following. In particular, women students and faculty who had been involved with the civil rights and antiwar movements were calling societal power dynamics into question and challenging authority of commonly held perceptions of what counted as "truth" or legitimate knowledge. In the process, the exclusion and marginalization of women's contributions to society in textbooks and curricular materials were also coming under scrutiny. In response, women's studies courses were established



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in some colleges and universities and, in others, efforts were made to work toward more gender balance in existing courses. These initiatives were also accompanied and supported by the generation and growth of campus women's centers and centers for research on women (Schonberger, 2002).

Nevertheless, dispositional discrimination against women students, often reinforced by women themselves, has posed an ongoing challenge, even after the implementation of nondiscrimination or equity-enhancing policies and efforts to develop more inclusive curricula and pedagogies (Conway, Ahern, and Steuernagel, 1999). So while the numbers of women attending college and the numbers of women administrators have dramatically increased over the last three decades, "optimism in this regard should be tempered by the realization that before the passage of Title IX, the numbers of women in these positions was abysmally low" (Conway, Ahern, and Steuernagel, 1999, p. 24). As described previously, a cursory examination of the total percentages does not depict the nuances of the inequitable representation of women at upper levels of various prestige hierarchies in U.S. higher education. Further, researchers continue to find evidence of campus climates where the privileging of masculine perspectives and norms shapes and sustains inequitable experiences for women, including wage disparities (King, 2010); disproportionate representation of women as victims of relationship violence and sexual harassment (McMahon, 2008; Fisher, Cullen, and Turner, 2000; Hill and Silva, 2005); and attitudes toward work and family life, household responsibilities, and emotional labor that affect professional advancement for women (V. J. Rosser, 2004; Stout, Staiger, and Jennings, 2007).

## Scholarship

Since the 1970s women's movement, scholarship by and about women has experienced unprecedented growth. Scholars from a range of fields have documented and produced knowledge about women's contributions to society and their development, health, and status in particular social arenas, including higher education. These scholars are far too numerous to be noted individually here, but their contributions have laid a strong foundation for many scholarly works referenced in this monograph. The literature specific to women

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in higher education emerged from the work of feminist academics from a range of disciplines committed to improving the experiences of women in colleges and universities. Pioneering scholars who applied feminist perspectives specifically to the study of higher education examined a range of topics, including access to higher education, student experiences and campus climate, the advancement of women employed in higher education, research and knowledge production, curricular issues, policy, leadership, and the organization of higher education (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988; Chamberlain, 1988; Rossi and Calderwood, 1973).

In recent years, several scholarly volumes have been particularly noteworthy in drawing attention to the study of women in higher education, delineating key gender equity problems, offering perspectives for understanding, and proposing responses to those problems. *Women in Higher Education: A Feminist Perspective* (Glazer-Raymo, Townsend, and Ropers-Huilman, 2000) provided comprehensive approaches to the topic featuring essays and research summaries authored by feminist scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives. In response to the breadth and depth several decades of research have produced, editors Martínez Alemán and Renn and contributors produced the encyclopedia *Women in Higher Education* (2002), with more than 120 academic contributors providing concise summaries of diverse topics in nine major content sections, for example: women in the curriculum, women and higher education policy, women students, staff, administrators, and employees. Glazer-Raymo's work in *Shattering the Myths: Women in Academe* (1999) and her edited volume *Unfinished Agendas: New and Continuing Gender Challenges in Higher Education* (2008b) examine in depth the sociopolitical and policy contexts shaping the status of women in higher education.

In 2008 the Project on the Status and Education of Women (initiated by Bernice Sandler in 1970) at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) published *A Measure of Equity: Women's Progress in Higher Education*. This thirty-seven-page data-driven report (Touchton, Musil, and Campbell, 2008) provides a concise synthesis of women's advancement toward full inclusion in the academy, documenting progress over four decades but also noting how the data reveal "the many areas where progress has been stymied or skewed by misinterpreted evidence" (p. v). Jacqueline King, from the American

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Council on Education's (ACE's) Center for Policy Analysis, has produced several data-driven reports synthesizing national data and tracking progress relative to gender equity in higher education over time (King, 2000, 2006, 2010). And in 2007 Sue Klein of the Feminist Majority Foundation and more than two hundred contributors authored the *Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity Through Education*, which includes a summary of scholarship related to gender equity in postsecondary education at the turn of the twenty-first century (Cooper and others, 2007).

Offering a specific focus on how social constructions of gender shape higher education, authors contributing to Ropers-Huilman's edited volume *Gendered Futures in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives for Change* (2003b) examine ways in which higher education environments are deeply and problematically gendered. Issues specific to women and minority faculty are explored in *Tenure in the Sacred Grove* (Cooper and Stevens, 2002). Expanding the context and providing an explicit focus on theories of change, Sagaria and contributors offer international perspectives in *Women, Universities and Change: Gender Equality in the European Union and the United States* (2007b). In addition to the scholars who compiled these volumes, others—too numerous to mention by name here—have produced noteworthy scholarship about particular issues or approaches relevant to women in higher education. The work of many of them is included in this monograph.

In sum, the research produced about women in higher education and about gender equity in higher education is considerable. Nevertheless, persistent problems and gender-related challenges for women demonstrate the need for continued understanding and analysis. The depth and sophistication of the research have evolved; however, the body of work is relatively nascent and ripe for further exploration to help tease out, with more precision, the factors and complex dynamics that shape and enhance gender equity in the context of higher education. Although recent volumes and reports have examined the status of women in higher education from a feminist perspective, this monograph differs in that it describes a taxonomy for organizing the scholarship about women's status in higher education, and it highlights multiple and diverse theoretical frames for analyzing this scholarship and its applications.

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## Organization of this Monograph

The chapters included in this monograph are intended to both review the current scholarship about women's status in higher education and provide readers with multiple lenses through which to make meaning of that scholarship and its implications for changing the status quo. The following chapter delineates diverse feminist theories as frames for understanding equity and analyzing strategies to advance women's status. Although feminist theory is often employed in research related to gender equity and the status of women, it is less common for scholars to articulate the importance of differing (and often competing) assumptions shaping various conceptual approaches in feminism. As a result, readers of these works, especially those who have not studied feminist theory, might understandably assume the word "feminism" implies one particular view. Although feminisms share certain premises, they also differ in important ways, which can have profound implications for the ways in which problems are analyzed. Thus, scholars and practitioners stand to gain new analytic tools by developing more nuanced understandings of feminist theory. Most important, expanding or refining lenses for analyzing persistent equity problems will also help expand the potential for resolving them.

The following two chapters, "Examining Women's Status: Access and Representation as Key Equity Indicators" and "Examining Women's Status: Campus Climate and Gender Equity," provide an overview of the current literature about gender equity in higher education. This review of the scholarship could have been organized chronologically by tracing developments over time or by constituent groups such as women students, staff, and faculty. Instead, I chose to organize the scholarship according to its primary emphasis on describing status in terms of access and representation or climate-related issues. These entities are not necessarily discrete, as many studies consider both representation and climate, but in the end, most scholarship tends to emphasize one over the other. Thus, this approach provided the most flexible framework for organizing and examining multiple dimensions and indicators of gender equity described in the literature.

The focus in the third chapter is access and representation; "access" is defined in terms of gatekeeping (gaining entry to institutions of higher education), and

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“representation” refers to *where* women are located or positioned once they have gained access to the institution as students, faculty, staff, or administrators. The chapter takes a closer look at the phenomenon of “the higher the fewer” for women in terms of their representation relative to occupational segregation and prestige hierarchies in and across institutions. Representation also refers to gaining access to particular institutional arenas like athletics, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, senior leadership roles, and senior faculty as well as the representation of women in different types of postsecondary institutions.

The following chapter shifts from describing numbers and locations of women in various higher education arenas to describing the experiences of women in different roles and contexts within postsecondary institutions. This emphasis is captured by the word “climate”—generally defined as “common member perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, feelings or attitudes” about organizational life (Cress, 2002, p. 391). Building on Peterson and Spencer’s overview (1990), Cress (2002) describes key characteristics that distinguish the concepts of campus culture and climate. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they are distinct. Campus culture, typically conceptualized from anthropological and sociological perspectives, refers to values deeply embedded in the organizational structure and is therefore considered enduring in nature. In contrast, the concept of campus climate emerges from conceptual frameworks of cognitive and social linguistics, psychology, and organizational behavior and emphasizes more current patterns of behavior and perceptions of an organization, which tend to be more malleable or susceptible to change (Cress, 2002; Hart and Fellabaum, 2008).

The following chapter, “Advancing Women’s Status: Analyzing Predominant Strategies” shines the spotlight on change making by providing a review of the literature related to predominant strategies for advancing gender equity in the context of higher education. Many of these strategies such as policy initiatives are not limited to higher education but are included because they have had profound effects on women’s status in higher education. The strategies are organized by theme and include reviews of literature related to activism, organizing, and women’s networks; policy-focused strategies; mentoring; augmenting institutional infrastructures; leadership development; altering

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organizational norms and practices; and curriculum transformation, including women's studies, feminist epistemology, and women-focused research centers. Building on the conceptual framing provided earlier, the chapter examines strategies through multiple lenses of feminist theory to help make embedded assumptions more explicit and examine ways in which these assumptions serve to shape and constrain the range of possible solutions to the problem of inequity.

The final chapter includes recommendations for further research and a brief discussion of the implications of drawing on multiple lenses to analyze equity. Several questions help guide the summary and set the stage for further exploration:

Based on the extant scholarship, what conclusions can be drawn about the current status of women in higher education?

What issues need further exploration?

Based on the literature, what assertions can be made about strategies to advance the status of women in higher education?

When considering strategies to advance gender equity in higher education, what feminist perspectives are most and least represented?

What are the underlying assumptions framing the problem-solving approaches, and what are their potential implications?

What recommendations can be offered based on this analysis?