

## Our Part in the Revolution

Judith White

**I**N THE END, IT ALL CAME DOWN to good old-fashioned Ivy League competitiveness—with a decidedly 20<sup>th</sup> century spin. Stemming the loss of top recruits to other Ivies was what it finally took to propel Princeton to commit to admitting women students – or “girls,” as most discussion labeled us at the time – along with accelerating the actual implementation of coeducation.

Admissions data showing strong trends favoring coeducational institutions prompted Princeton President Robert Goheen, in June 1967, to call admission of women undergraduates “inevitable.” That comment, supposedly off-the-record in an interview on other matters with the *Daily Princetonian*, set Princeton firmly on the path to coeducation.

Still, universities do not typically change centuries of tradition quickly or without exhaustive study. And Princeton’s journey to coeducation was certainly thorough and thoughtful. (Others looking back might argue long and arduous!) It actually commenced earlier in the decade with experiments in hosting critical language women students (“critters”), who ultimately returned to their home colleges for their degrees.

In June 1967, the Board of Trustees took action that would ultimately put Princeton in the vanguard of coeducation analytics. Responding to President Goheen’s request for “careful and hard-headed” study, at its meeting that month the Board empaneled a committee led by economics Professor Gardner Patterson to study the possibilities of coeducation at Princeton.

The Patterson Report was issued on September 12, 1968 following more than a year of work analyzing a wide range of topics, with inevitable debate on a series of interim reports. It argued strongly that the admission of women undergraduates was economically feasible, and indeed essential to the long-term financial health of the institution. It would also be a benefit to the academic as well as social life of the University.

Conspicuously missing was any thoughtful recognition of the movement of women into greater public roles, or opportunities for Princeton leadership in preparing female leaders. Consideration of women’s intellectual, social and even practical needs as prospective students was simply not part of the equation!

Nonetheless, the arguments were persuasive, and the Board voted in January 1969 to approve coeducation, calling it “the largest single decision that has faced Princeton in this century.”

The next phase of study commenced immediately with a sense of urgency — but no set date for the start of the transition — focusing on what Princeton would need to do in order to address the needs of its new women students. As reported by Nancy Weiss Malkiel in *Keep the Damned Women Out: The Struggle for Coeducation* (Princeton University Press, 2016), President Goheen convened a national advisory group of women in higher education who were recognized for leadership in educating women. Along with its many recommendations, the group agreed that implementing those ideas would take until the fall of 1970.

But in February 1969, the *Daily Princetonian* reported that Princeton had lost 56% of its top recruits to Harvard and Yale, primarily because those potential students preferred a campus with coeds. Preparing for all options, the admissions office immediately began distributing applications to women candidates, with a disclaimer that admissions might not be granted for Fall 1969. When the Board met in April 1969, the trustees voted to admit women students – first year and transfers – for the coming Fall. The admissions office was ready, and the much-studied transition to coeducation was now on a four-month implementation schedule.

## *Ready . . . or Not*

In retrospect, the name of the game for those four months, and the next couple of years to follow, was improvisation – both for the University and its newly arriving women. Far from ready for prime time on both sides, it felt like we were taking part in a dress rehearsal but lacking stage prompts – or really any clues about what we were even rehearsing.

Our women classmates first on campus, in September 1969, found themselves oddly sequestered, and yet somewhat on display, in Pyne Hall. And the following September – when most of our number arrived as junior transfers – efforts to integrate us better instead dispersed us so widely among dorms and residential colleges that we rarely encountered one another. Improvise!

Vignettes shared by Women of '72 in the companion essay attest to an abundance of challenges and inconveniences widely encountered beyond dorm assignments. Yes, having women's bathrooms in each building might have been a good start. Improvise! Institutional support in general was largely missing. Improvise!

Our testimony also credits the University for getting some things right. Among them, the appointment of Halcy Bohen in 1969 as Assistant Dean of Students, whose active support of women students was a great help to many of us. Well done on that one! Happily, most of us found faculty who were as generous as they were talented. Women faculty members were few and far between during our time. That was about to change, to the benefit of future Princetonian women.

## *Title IX – Bigger Transitions on the Horizon for Women and Higher Education*

Two Women of 1972 – **Barbara Julius** and **Vera Marcus** – were among the first women freshmen matriculating in 1969, thus earning the distinction of becoming the first women to graduate having spent their undergraduate careers entirely at Princeton. The other 62 women in our class also achieved unique status in Princeton history as the last of what might be called the “transition pioneers” — women who transferred from other institutions in 1969 or 1970 to join the last class of men who had entered an all-male Princeton. After 1972, all graduating classes included women who matriculated with the class.

Worth noting in the larger scheme of things, from the perspective of 50 years out – the Women of '72 were also the last women to graduate from Princeton before the passage of Title IX federal legislation on June 23, 1972. Mandating equal access for women in higher education, this law effectively propelled all of higher education into decades of transition. As it happened, my own professional career ultimately became grounded in Title IX and its impacts on women's education in particular. While our own student lives were largely unaffected, the groundswell of revolutionary change generated by Title IX has surely helped propel many of us in our later endeavors.

Most Americans of our generation have heard of Title IX, but few recognize its full impact. Certainly, few of us at Princeton in 1972 were following its progress at the time. While advocacy for civil rights and opposition to the war in Vietnam were key parts of political life on campus, the women's rights movement was further in the background. Probably most of us were aware of the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment, which Congress passed in 1972. Likely many were aware that an abortion rights case was making its way through the courts, yielding the *Roe v Wade* decision by the Supreme Court in 1973.

But the “Titles” or sections of the 1972 Education Appropriations Act were under the national political radar, except for passionate advocates for gender equity. Since the 1960s those advocates had been focused on the need to open access and expand educational opportunities for women as a critical first step toward improving women's political and economic status. It's difficult from modern perspectives to appreciate the scope and impact of institutionalized differences between men's and women's education at that time. Everything reflected expectations that women were preparing for different lives based largely on gender. Even for coed-

educational colleges and universities, women were rarely admitted on an equal basis as men, and programs and services were not equally available.

By outlawing discrimination based on sex, Title IX shifted the burden of proof about the appropriateness of those gender-based distinctions. Athletics is the arena most people associate with Title IX, but the law required all educational programs to address and correct their historic expectations and limitations for women.

### *Ready for our Part*

While gender discrimination may not have been in the forefront of our minds, the Women of '72 as students recognized new opportunities becoming available. We were eager to try an educational path that had been closed to us. Some of us came with expectations to pursue professions that had not generally been open to women before us – maybe we were aware of that, maybe not.

For all of us, the experience of being at Princeton shaped how we moved into a world in which roles for women and men were changing. Faced with the inevitable shortcomings of Princeton's hurried embrace of coeducation, we fixed things for ourselves and left precedents for others. In particular, women athletes helped set the stage for changes coming under Title IX. Some of us stayed involved at Princeton and kept pressing for critical changes that have helped women and served the University in many ways. More of us took our pioneer experiences into a broad range of fields – our work, our relationships, our parenting, our volunteering. We took individual stands and joined collective efforts to make excellence and equity more prevalent in our society and around the globe.

Looking back again at our arrival on the scene at the dawn of coeducation at Princeton, was the University ready for us? Based on Women of '72 testimony, the answer has to be not really.

Our stories, however, answer more important questions: Were the Women of '72 ready for Princeton? And ultimately, were we ready for our part in the revolution coming for women's roles in the world, and for women's and men's lives across the globe?

*ABSOLUTELY YES!*

### *Stand-outs at the 2018 SHE ROARS conference.*

Many years later, ten of us attended the University's historic SHE ROARS celebration of Princeton women. Representing the Women of '72, we were acknowledged and feted for our historic role as pioneers in Princeton's transformation from all-male (which most of the attendees could barely imagine) to coed. Along with alumnae from '70, '71 and '73, we were asked to stand for recognition at the conclusion of Nancy Weiss Malkiel's talk on her scholarly treatise, *Keep the Damned Women Out*.

On arriving at Jadwin for that talk, and finding impossibly long rows of seats flanking a single aisle at the center, we quickly created shorter rows by removing seats from the middle of one section and handing them fire-brigade style to the back for easier access by all. As the gym filled in, a group of '92 alumnae sat down around the Women of '72 and, observing our enterprise, concluded:

"You Pioneers have been rearranging Princeton for a long time!"



*LtoR. Helena Novakova, Chris Loomis, Barbara Julius, Helene Fromm, Daryl English, Mary Wadsworth Darby, Judith White, Claudia Tesoro, Sherry Leiwant, Holly Lovejoy*