

Hearing Aids: How Scripps College Is Cultivating Dialogue



BY DANIELLE DORSEY

When the nation's first women's colleges were established, it was during an era when women who earned advanced degrees were considered unconventional—and those who used their education to cultivate their independence were viewed as downright controversial. In the United States, women did not have access to higher education until the mid-1800s, and even then their coursework was often limited to classes in "domestic science" or "home economics."

But in spite of the numerous challenges they faced and the battles they fought and won for the right to attend college, the majority of women admitted during those fledgling years were from similar backgrounds, tending to be from elite, well-educated families.

Of course, student demographics at women's colleges have changed radically since the turn of the 20th century. Today's students share their forbears' passion for academic pursuits, professional achievement, and social change, but they represent a significantly more diverse range of experiences, communities, and perspectives.

Women's colleges now accept a higher rate of minority, first-generation, and economically disadvantaged students compared to their public and private coeducational counterparts. Women's colleges have seen enrollment by students of color steadily increase over the past decade; black women make up the greatest proportion of people of color enrolled, while the number of self-identified Hispanic women has risen 57 percent since 2004.

Historically, women's college students are much more likely to be first-generation college students than those at peer liberal arts colleges; today at Scripps, first-generation students make up nearly 10 percent of the first-year class. And,

according to a 2014 New York Times article on higher education, women's colleges are currently some of the most economically diverse schools in the nation.

These demographic shifts have continued to nurture a focus on issues of equality and social justice that has been longstanding on women's college campuses. But it has also sometimes been the source of tension, as students from divergent backgrounds have had to adjust to living and learning alongside one another. Recognizing this, Scripps has invested in resources that help increase understanding and respect between students in order to create an inclusive campus environment. Last year, the College launched the I.D.E.A. (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access) initiative in partnership with the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network and Public Conversations Project. The aim of I.D.E.A. is to enable productive and peaceful dialogue, and nurture a culture where the entire Scripps community—students, faculty, staff, trustees, and alumnae—feels supported and safe.

I.D.E.A. launched a variety of successful programs over the 2014-15 academic year. Its early work involved encouraging students to share their experiences, focusing on complicated aspects of personal identity such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class—and

Illustration by Joseph Pritchard

all of their overlapping points. More than 60 students participated in inclusivity leadership workshops and student-moderated dialogue groups that explored issues of loneliness, class, race, and religion. In addition, the President's Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusion (PACDI) developed a robust set

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of recommendations for strengthening support for students, faculty, and staff, which were then presented to Scripps' leadership. Faculty and staff were also invited to participate in “difficult dialogue” workshops; faculty heard from recent alumnae about inclusivity in our classrooms, and thought leaders came to campus to share their experiences and expertise on a variety of topics ranging from Islamophobia to white privilege.

Though still in its infancy, I.D.E.A. is expected to create even more opportunities for dialogue and understanding as it continues to take root on campus. As

Rachel Berner-Hays '17, a student member of PACDI and student moderator for I.D.E.A., observes, “The first year was focused more on exposing us to sustained dialogue and learning the different techniques to talk about identity and how that influences our experiences at Scripps. For a lot of us, it was the first time we were exposed to that sort of program; we wanted to be intentional about applying it to different concepts and tying it in with life at Scripps so that we're not just taking this prescription, but really trying to figure out what Scripps needs and how we can fulfill that.”

Scripps Communities of Resources and Empowerment (SCORE) is another campus group that has partnered with I.D.E.A. Now in its 13th year, SCORE provides organizational support and resources to student groups in order to promote social and political awareness within them, focusing on issues such as class, gender, race, and religion. SCORE also houses a number of student-sponsored programs in its offices, including the Asian American Sponsor Program, which provides social, emotional, and academic support to first-year Asian American/Pacific Islander students; Café Con Leche, a forum for the discussion of social, political, and economic issues affecting Latina students; Family, a space for queer and queer-allied students to tackle personal and political issues; and Wanawake Weusi, which supports the social-economic, social-political, and spiritual well-being of women of color.

According to SCORE Assistant Director Victoria Verlezza, it is an ongoing effort to stay informed and be a positive ally to the campus community as such issues evolve. “We are constantly working together to further [Scripps'] mission... Things change very quickly, and even our office definitions are changing. My

co-worker and I say, ‘Wait, what are you talking about?’ Then we go and educate ourselves, and then we help educate others.”

As Verlezza's comments suggest, groups like I.D.E.A. and SCORE are important because they facilitate productive dialogue between individual students as well as between student groups, and they help Scripps' leadership make thoughtful, well-informed policy decisions that are responsive to student needs. In May 2015, when Scripps students demonstrated across The Claremont Colleges in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, they expressed their concerns and the struggles they encountered on campus as a result of institutionalized racism. College President Lori Bettison-Varga responded to their protests with a message announcing her solidarity with the movement and inviting students to meet with her to propose solutions for how to best address their concerns.

The ability to cultivate sustained dialogue on campus has also helped guide issues around gender expression. Some campus policies have begun to change—most bathrooms on campus are gender neutral, and students are invited to share their preferred gender pronouns with faculty and peers—yet opinions still clash over where to draw the line.

In December 2014, Scripps changed the admissions policy to include students identified as female on their birth certificates as well as those who self-identify as women. This change will go into effect in fall 2016, and over the next year, through programs like I.D.E.A., Scripps aims to create awareness on campus so that any faculty, alumnae, and students who remain wary of these changes can bring their concerns to the community.

According to Berner-Hays, Scripps' investment in promoting inclusivity on campus is important not only to the quality of the educational experience, but also for life after college. “I think an inclusive environment changes your perception so that you view it as an expectation instead of the exception. The entire community is so supportive, and it really allows you to grow into your own, whether that be as a leader or any role you might choose.”

This intentional cultivation of an inclusive campus environment perhaps in part explains why students who enroll in women's colleges are more committed to influencing social values, promoting racial understanding, and becoming community leaders, compared to those of peer coeducational institutions, according to a 2008 study by the Women's College Coalition.

In Ellen Browning Scripps' vision for the College, she stated, “The paramount obligation of a college is to develop in its students the ability to think clearly and independently, and the ability to live confidently, courageously, and hopefully.” It seems deliberate that the philanthropist and early suffragette did not mention these students' ethnic, religious, racial, or economic backgrounds. Instead, she emphasized a quality of character, hoping to attract students who can empower each other to work together to pursue their passions. ☀