

Single-Sex Colleges in the U.S. & the Transgender Exigency

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Increased visibility and interest in transgender issues and politics in the past decade have contributed to a definitional rupture with regard to sex and gender—a phenomenon I call the Transgender Exigency. By definitional rupture I mean a definitional argument or series of disputes that cannot be resolved simply or neutrally but only by considering the process of defining itself—How and why do we define words? Who should have the power to define? What values and interests are advanced by competing definitions? This paper examines how single-sex colleges in the U.S. have responded to the transgender exigency using a framework for analyzing definitional arguments I advanced in *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (2003).

Colleges in the United States began as male-only institutions, typically funded by religious denominations. What is now known as Harvard University was founded in 1636 to train clergy for the growing colonial population from England. Harvard, like other colleges founded before 1800, such as Yale, Princeton, William & Mary, St. John's, and the University of Pennsylvania, only admitted men. The first coeducational college in the U.S. was Oberlin College in Ohio. Though founded in 1833, its first female students did not matriculate until 1837. The first women's colleges were Wesleyan College in Georgia, chartered in 1836, and Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in 1837.

The exclusion of women from U.S. colleges reflects the cultural norms of the time. Men were educated to participate in the public sphere of business and politics while women were largely confined to the private sphere to care for home and family: "The colonial view of woman was simply that she was intellectually inferior—incapable, merely by reason of being a woman, of great thoughts. Her faculties were not worth training. Her place was in the home, where man assigned her a number of useful functions" (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 307-8). Women's colleges were founded with a mission to provide young women with an education of the same quality as was available to men.

While some early women's institutions of higher learning were limited mostly to preparing women to be wives and mothers, others were designed to be seminaries for women, and others still had a more feminist goal of educating and empowering women to be successful leaders in any field (Horowitz, 1993). The idea of women attending college was opposed by some who felt that women belonged in the home, or that women were too frail for college, or would lose their femininity by attending college. In the famous *Declaration of Sentiments* emerging from the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, one of the injuries on the part of man toward woman is that "He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her" (Stanton, 1848). Social movements such as women's suffrage and the abolition movement contributed to the founding of some women's colleges (Langdon, 2001). The founder of Wellesley College declared in *The Spirit of the College* that "We revolt against the slavery in which women are held by the customs of society—the broken health, the aimless lives, the subordinate position, the helpless dependence, the dishonesties and shams of so-called education. The Higher Education of Women is one of the great world battle-cries for freedom; for right against might. It is the cry of the oppressed slave. It is the assertion of absolute equality" (Durant, 1890, p. 3).

Only some founders of women's colleges publicly embraced tenets we would now call feminist (indeed, some felt the need to be circumspect in their politics), but in hindsight the establishment of high quality women's colleges was a profoundly feminist accomplishment.

We have moved from an age when all U.S. colleges were single-sex (specifically male) to an era where single-sex colleges are a rarity. Of the 233 women's colleges in 1960 (Langdon, 2001), less than 40 remain operating today, and there are only four men's colleges left. Women's colleges persist largely for what can be described as feminist reasons—to counteract the discrimination and sexism that is still evident in coeducational institutions, and thus to provide a more supportive and favorable climate for women's learning and achievement (Langdon, 2001).

Describing how these single-sex colleges have responded to the definitional challenges of the Transgender Exigency is the objective of this paper.

WOMEN'S COLLEGES

In 2013, Calliope Wong, a transgender senior in high school, was denied admission to Smith College because her Federal Student Aid application form identified her as male. Her application and application fee were returned to her with the explanation that Smith College required applicants to be female at the time of admission. Wong certainly was not the first trans woman to seek admission to an all-women's college, but aided by the power of social media, she became a *cause célèbre* as her blog and her story were widely shared and became national news. Sympathetic Smith students formed Facebook groups in support, and national organizations such as the Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund rallied to her cause (see, for example, McQuade, 2013). Wong ultimately chose to attend the University of Connecticut. Nonetheless, accounts of women's colleges' policies toward transgender applicants typically point to her efforts as a catalyst for women's colleges to clarify and publicize their policies. Admission policies involving transgender applicants ultimately turn on a question of definition: "What does it mean to *be* a woman?" (Davis, 2017, p. 580).

A year later, in May of 2014, Mills College became the first U.S. women's college to create a formal written admissions policy that includes transgender and gender fluid applicants. Their stated policy says "Mills admits self-identified women and people assigned female at birth who do not fit into the gender binary" (Mills, 2020). Both Mills and Smith Colleges claim to have been open to transgender students before their official policy statements, but because such decisions were made on an ad hoc basis, there was a lack of clarity that could lead to controversies such as Wong's denial of admission to Smith (Bennett-Smith, 2013; Martin, 2013; Mitchell, 2014). Smith College followed suit in May of 2015, and in a remarkably short period of time, most women's colleges in the U.S. have published policies allowing transgender women to apply.

As of April, 2020, a substantial majority of the 39 colleges that are members of the Women's College Coalition have revised their policies to permit transgender women as applicants (North, 2017). The precise definitional criteria at work at these various institutions vary. At one end of the spectrum, some institutions merely require applicants to self-identify as women. Smith College's admission policy declares, "We welcome applicants who identify as women, including those who were assigned male at birth. *No specific documentation is required to verify an applicant's gender*" (Smith, 2020, emphasis added). Bennett College for Women, Cedar Crest College, Mills College, Russell Sage College, Simmons University, are others who simply ask for self-identification, and Cedar Crest explicitly says "We do not require government issued documentation for purposes of identifying an applicant's gender identity" (Cedar Crest, 2020). Mount Holyoke's admission webpage states simply, "We welcome applications from female, transgender and nonbinary students" (Mount Holyoke, 2020). Put into the form of a regulatory definition (X counts as Y in context C), then the sole definitive attribute is self-identification: Anyone who self-identifies as a woman (X) counts as a woman (Y) in the context of applying to this institution (C).

A second common definitional approach goes a step further to require applicants to have an established history as women. The most common wording here requires applicants to "consistently self-identify and live as women."

Similar wording to “consistently live and identify as women” can be found at a variety of schools, including Alverno, Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Spelman, and Wellesley. The FAQs for some colleges answer the obvious follow-up question of “What does it mean to consistently live and identify as a woman.” Barnard College states: “The applicant must identify herself as a woman and her application materials must support this self-identification. If the applicant is concerned about discrepancies in her application materials, she can speak with an admissions counselor or address any concerns in the essay or personal statement” (Barnard, 2019). It is not unusual at these institutions to seek supporting evidence of this self-identification (see also Bryn Mawr, 2020; Wesleyan College, 2020). Hence the regulatory definition could be formulated as: Anyone who consistently lives and identifies as a women (X) counts as a women (Y) in the context of applying to this institution (C).

The first definitional approach, explicitly requiring only self-identification, varies from this second approach primarily based on the reduced emphasis on the definitive attribute of *duration*. Sherie Gilmore-Cleveland, Director of Admissions of Mills College, states, “Students’ self-identification does not have to match school documentation. If we have questions regarding a student’s self-identification we inquire with the student based on their answers for clarification. The question of eligibility is based on the student’s self-identification not a span of time” (Gilmore-Cleveland, 2020). The President of Cedar Crest College, Dr. Elizabeth Meade, noted that decisions about gender identity sometimes emerge late in adolescence, and some students may come from homes where gender nonconformity might not feel comfortable or safe. A decision to transition to female might begin at the start of college, in other words. Accordingly, at Cedar Crest there is no specific requirement about the previous duration of an applicant’s self-identification as a woman, but there is an “expectation that you will come to the college and continue to identify as a woman” (Meade, 2020).

A third and less common definitional requirement is that applicants must have completed the process of legally changing their sex on official documents. According to the survey conducted by *Vox* (North, 2017), Converse College, Cottey College, Salem

College, and Scripps College will admit trans women if they have been legally assigned female. Sweet Brian College will admit a trans woman if she has been able to change her birth certificate to female. Stephens College admission policy says they “will also admit and enroll students who were not born female, but who identify and live as women; those students will need to provide legal documentation that they are legally women or that they are transitioning to female” (Stephens College, 2018). Thus the regulatory definition would be Anyone who is *legally recognized* as a women (X) counts as a women (Y) in the context of applying to this institution (C).

Why have women’s colleges moved to accept transgender applicants? The core value that seems to inform the changing policies is a commitment to the cause of feminism, which includes an acknowledgement that women have long endured discrimination. Priya Kandaswamy, a faculty member at Mills College who was on the subcommittee that drafted their new transgender policy, is quoted as saying “We strongly identify with our original mission, but we do think that women’s colleges were originally founded to make education more accessible for those who were discriminated against based on gender and today that includes transgender” (in Mitchell, 2014). In a public letter by Wellesley College’s President and Board of Trustees Chair announcing the decision to consider any applicant who “lives as a woman and consistently identifies as a woman,” it was noted that the origins of Wellesley was an important social-political accomplishment: “The creation of Wellesley College was a revolutionary act, challenging and confounding entrenched views about the roles and capacities of women.” They further noted that, “Despite all the progress of the past century, women still face hurdles in realizing their potential.” Accordingly, the feminist rationale for the formation of the College continues: “It is clear to us that the concept of a women’s college, and the reasons for having one, are as valid today as they have been at any time in the past” (Gates and Bottomly, 2015).

Feminist scholars were the first to describe the social and cultural variability of gender identity. Thus, for one graduate of Mills, allowing transgender women to apply was “the right move” to “remain a women’s college while also having a more inclusive view of gender

identity rather than relying on what it says on a person's documents" (in Mitchell, 2014).

To summarize the paper thus far, women's colleges have responded to the transgender exigency in various ways. Some do not admit transgender women, and those that do vary in the definitional criteria used to decide who "counts" as a woman for the purposes of admission. The colleges and universities that admit transgender women do so, it would seem, because they see "women" as a category in which cisgender and transgender women share similar social-political status.

MEN'S COLLEGES

As of 2020, the number of single-sex colleges for men has dwindled to four in the U.S.: Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana; Morehouse College, a historically black men's college in Atlanta, Georgia; Hampden-Sydney College in Hampden-Sydney, Virginia; and Saint John's University in St. Joseph, Minnesota. Currently, two of the four decline to admit transgender men (Jaschik, 2019). St. John's announced in November 2016 that it would consider transgender applicants: "In furtherance of our mission, tradition, and values as an undergraduate college for men, and in recognition of our changing world and evolving understanding of gender identity, Saint John's University will consider for undergraduate admission those applicants who consistently live and identify as men, regardless of the gender assigned to them at birth" (SJU Trustees, 2016).

The mission of St. John's University is specific to men: "Grounded in Catholic and Benedictine values and tradition, Saint John's University provides young men a distinctive residential liberal arts education, preparing them to reach their full potential and instilling in them the values and aspiration to lead lives of significance and principled achievement" (SJU, 2020). Furthermore, the University identifies a set of values to which the institution is committed: Community, Openness, Respect, Depth, Sacredness, and Passion.

Less than three years later, Morehouse College announced that it would admit transgender men, though if a student transitions from a man to a woman, that student would be asked to leave (Dodd, 2019). Specifically, the policy states that, "In furtherance of our mission, tradition, and values as a men's college, and in

recognition of our changing world and evolving understanding of gender identity, Morehouse will now consider for admission applicants who live and self-identify as men, regardless of the sex assigned to them at birth" (Morehouse College, 2019).

The mission statement of Morehouse is worth quoting here: "The mission of Morehouse College is to develop men with disciplined minds who will lead lives of leadership and service. A private historically black liberal arts college for men, Morehouse realizes this mission by emphasizing the intellectual and character development of its students. In addition, the College assumes special responsibility for teaching the history and culture of black people." Like St. John's, Morehouse also identifies a series of values that shape the College's culture, including spirituality, community, accountability, trust, respect, integrity, honesty, civility, and compassion.

The point is that St. John's University and Morehouse College saw no conflict between their mission and values as men's colleges and a definition of "men" that includes transgender men. They both ask only that applicants "live and self-identify" as men. The definitive attributes identified here are twofold: To *self-identify* is an explicit act that is at the discretion of the applicant. To *live as a man* is obviously more vague, given that there are many ways of living as a man. In an email exchange with a former administrator at St. John's University, I learned that they do not necessarily expect evidence of a past commitment but rather are looking toward the future: There is no requirement for "legal documentation or previous requirement of identifying as a trans man. Our expectation has been that the trans applicant intends to identify as a man going forward. In other words, we would accept a trans student who intends to identify as a man throughout his college career." Vice President for Student Development at the College of Saint Benedict, Mary Geller, who helped formulate the admission policy for both Saint Benedict and St. John's, confirmed that the future intention is more important than past duration (Geller, 2020). Thus, for all practical purposes at St. John's, the two attributes collapse into one and function in a manner similar to women's colleges that only require self-identification.

Hampden-Sydney College (or H-SC) only allows applicants who were assigned male at

birth and identify as male (Jaschik, 2019; Stimpert, 2020). H-SC is the 10th oldest college in the US, founded in 1775. It is located in Prince Edward County, notoriously known for having refused to abide by the Supreme Court's desegregation decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (Green, 2015). Vestiges of racism linger: In 2012, a group of about 40 students protested the reelection of Barack Obama as President, gathering outside the minority students' union. Students "shouted racial slurs, tossed bottles, set off fireworks and threatened physical violence," leading to four of the protesting students being disciplined (Winter, 2012).

There is no question that there are progressive elements within the college and student body; nonetheless, H-SC has earned a reputation overall of being conservative, and that conservatism apparently includes gender politics. For example, In 2016 the college first terminated, then reappointed, a visiting faculty member who had made public statements that were interpreted by some as advocating violence against transgender women who use a women's restroom (Kapsidelis, 2016). More recently, the Editor-in-Chief of the student newspaper published an editorial titled "Transgender Lies Become Tyrannical" that, among other things, refers to the "false ideology of transgenderism" and considers the word "transphobic" to be a "nonsense word." Proclaiming that, "The transgender delusion has carried on far enough," the author argues that opposition to "transgenderism" is being censored to a degree he considers tyrannical (Bredin, 2019). The editorial is consistent with other conservative press coverage that treats transgender claims with skepticism, such as the headline "Women's college to admit male students posing as women" (Haverluck, 2018). Implicit in the H-SC editorial is a commitment to biological determinism, though obviously it cannot be assumed that commitment is shared by the College's administration. Furthermore, the editorial swiftly received substantial criticism from parties from within and outside of H-SC (see, for example, Utzinger, 2019).

Dr. Larry Stimpert, President of Hampden-Sydney College, explained that H-SC's commitment to form "good men and good citizens" dates back to the college's founding and continues to inform its policies today (2020). The admissions policy has evolved since 2011 from requiring that applicants be legally

considered male (which, in theory, might allow a transgender applicant who had changed his birth certificate) to a 2017 requirement that applicants must be born and identify as male. President Stimpert did not identify a rationale for excluding transgender men other than the historic commitment to being a men's college. With the University of Virginia beginning to admit women as undergraduates in 1970, and the Supreme Court requirement that the Virginia Military Institute admit women in 1996, H-SC is the last men's college in Virginia. Stimpert noted that an on-going concern of alumni and Board of Trustees is staying true to that commitment and tradition, and that there is resistance to changes that might be interpreted as moving the college toward becoming co-educational. Admitting transgender applicants could be perceived by some as just such a move. At the same time, Stimpert noted that there have been discussions among senior leadership about what to do if a current H-SC student transitioned to become a woman, and the unanimous response was that the College would support such a student to complete their degree at H-SC rather than requiring the student to leave.

Wabash College's Student Senate debated the question of admitting transgender men several times and rejected the idea because they felt admission would, in fact, hinder the college's pursuit of its mission. A spokesperson for Wabash told *Inside Higher Ed* that "the college's admissions policy is to evaluate candidates based on our singular and historic mission to be a liberal arts college for men chartered in the state of Indiana. All of our programs and policies are designed to support our mission." Asked if this meant that the college would admit only those classified by the government as male, he said, "legally male as defined by the state in which we are chartered" (Jaschik, 2017).

The explicit Mission Statement for Wabash College is not all that different from those of Morehouse or St. John's: "Wabash College educates men to think critically, act responsibly, lead effectively, and live humanely" (Wabash, 2020). The core values of Wabash are often referenced as constituted by what is called the Gentleman's Rule.

One might interpret the emphasis on the Gentleman's Rule, competition, independence and self-reliance as reflecting certain traditional masculine norms, and, indeed, there is evidence that at least some who opposed the admission of

transgender students were motivated by a desire to maintain those norms. Though one needs to be careful not to overgeneralize, concerns have been expressed about the degree of sexism on campus. An account in the *Chicago Tribune* reported that some faculty “worry about the locker-room talk that sometimes erupts in classrooms, and the sexist attitudes some students express. Classroom discussions that touch on women's issues can be particularly strained” (Breslin, 2001). A student editorial in the school newspaper, *The Bachelor*, defends Wabash as a Brotherhood of Men, and argued that “allowing a transgender individual here would violate our single-sex education as well as our Brotherhood” (Russel, 2018). Criticizing the idea that “traditional male gender roles are harmful,” the author defends the norms of “self-reliance, competition, and dominance” as “helpful in life.” Echoing what I have described earlier as biological determinism, the student states, “I believe, as do many of my brothers, that a person is born with their sex determined” (Russel, 2018). An equally strong statement about the biological basis for sex was articulated by a Student Senator who opposes the admission of transgender students: “I fully disagree with the idea that somehow somebody’s perception in their mind changes their biological and genetic nature. Honestly the only common denominator when it comes to manhood is that genetic [component]. You are genetically male or female” (Block, 2016, p. 3). Another student editorial argued, “it is unproductive to push for the admittance of women who claim to be men, not only because it would cease to make Wabash an all-male school, but it would utterly distort the nature of authentic manhood on campus” (Kaufman, 2016).

The author’s choice of words here, referring to “the nature of authentic manhood,” is described by myself and others as the language of essentialism (Schiappa, 2003, p. 36). The language of essentialism refers to linguistic practices that reflect and depend on *metaphysical absolutism*—the belief that things have independent, “objective” structures or essences that are knowable “in themselves” (Barnes 1982, pp. 79–83). One can discern such metaphysical absolutism when a distinction is made between “real” versus “apparent” Xs, as in this case between “the nature of authentic manhood” versus, implicitly, inauthentic or only apparent manhood. My argument in *Defining*

Reality is that the language of essentialism is problematic for two reasons.

First, metaphysical absolutism is a mostly discredited philosophical doctrine, at least when it comes to the practice of definition. Most philosophers have long since rejected the idea that we can identify timeless essences to describe what the “nature” of things are (Schiappa, 2003, pp. 39–41). Our culture is very far from a shared understanding of what “the nature of authentic manhood” is.

Second, deploying an alleged metaphysical distinction often obfuscates important social needs and values that are involved in acts of definition. As William James pointed out over a century ago, what we deem as an “essential” attribute of a thing is motivated by our purposes: “The essence of a thing is that one of its properties which is so *important for my interests* that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest” (1981, p. 961). That is why, for example, Rebecca R. Helm stipulated, “*as a developmental biologist*, I define male/female as organisms producing sperm/eggs” (2020, emphasis added).

If someone says “oh that is not ‘real’ music” or “he’s not a ‘real man’,” we can be sure that the person has a *preferred* form of music or definition of manhood that s/he has deemed “essential,” “authentic,” or “real.” Thus, in a definitional controversy, it is important to put one’s cards on the table, so to speak, and identify the attributes that define “men” or “manhood” in the context of a college setting most valuable. Only then can an assessment of whether transgender men should “count” as men in that context be made.

Wabash and Hampden-Sydney rely on one’s assigned sex at birth to define men and women. Why?¹ At least the case of Wabash, there is some evidence that the exclusion of transgender men is based on a belief in biological determinism: “[Our] brotherhood exists due to the very nature of our experience grounded in and shaped by our biological masculinity that sets us apart, but not above, women. Once we make one move to change this standard, it will compromise what manhood means at this

¹ I asked the President and Director of Admissions at Wabash College to provide a brief explanation of why they do not admit transgender men applicants, and was told they had nothing to add other than what was reported in Jaschik (2017).

institution and we will never recover from that” (Kaufman, 2016).

One might ask why Morehouse College and St. John’s University decided otherwise? It is worth noting that Morehouse and St. John’s both coordinate with sibling all-women’s colleges—Spelman College for Morehouse and the College of Saint Benedict for St. John’s. The institutions share curriculum and access to certain facilities of the other. The conversation at Morehouse was prompted, at least in part, by Spelman College’s decision in 2017 to admit transgender women (Jaschik, 2019). I suspect it would be difficult to explain why a woman’s college should accept transgender applicants while their sibling men’s college should not. If a commitment to self-identification and living as a woman is sufficient for the woman’s college, why should it not be functionally similar for the affiliated men’s college?

To sum up, there are two regulatory definitions at work for men’s colleges. Excluding transgender applicants, the first can be formulated as: Only those assigned the sex male at birth (X) counts as a man (Y) in the context of applying to this institution (C). Including transgender applicants, the second can be described as: Those who consistently live and identify as men, regardless of the gender assigned to them at birth (X) counts as men (Y) in the context of applying to this institution (C).

CONCLUSION

Regulatory definitions have three characteristics. First, regulatory definitions are formulated and authorized by recognized organizations or institutions. In this case, individual schools have been the organizations formulating the definitions. National or organizations have demurred from advocating specific policies and definitions so far. There is, at this point in time, no particular legal or regulatory mechanism to compel a common definitional practice across the nation.

Second, regulatory definitions are designed to promote denotative conformity; that is, when using language we want to be able to observe a phenomenon and agree that X is a Y. It is clear that at this point in time, we lack denotative conformity with respect to gender identification for admission to single-sex schools because the definitions vary in a nontrivial manner. For some institutions, only cisgender males or

females “count” as men or women for the purposes of admission. For others, a transgender applicant can count as an eligible boy or girl, woman or man, but the specific definitive attributes vary significantly, requiring only self-identification on one end of the spectrum, to some evidence of duration in the middle (“consistently live and identify as Y”), to having “legally” transitioned to the school’s gender on the other end of the spectrum.

What this means is that we are still in a state of definitional rupture, wherein a specific person would be defined as a boy or man by one school and a girl or woman by another.

A third characteristic of regulatory definitions is that words are defined to serve one or more specific purpose and promote certain values or interests for those involved. It is reasonable to infer that when there are different and competing definitions, it is a result of competing values and interests at work. This point is, I believe, key to understanding *why* different single-sex schools have generated different definitions.

It seems reasonable to generalize that colleges permitting transgender women to apply have done so because such institutions often have feminist histories, values, and commitments—by which I mean a distrust of biological determinism (often used to justify the oppression of women), an acknowledgement that transgender women face discrimination similar (though not identical) to what cisgender women’s experience, and a desire to empower women for success in a largely sexist world.

The four remaining men’s colleges are currently divided. Both Saint John’s and Morehouse will admit applicants who “consistently live and identify as men,” but there is little public indication of *why*. Saint John’s simply says the change was made “in recognition of our changing world and evolving understanding of gender identity” (SJU, 2016). Morehouse offers identical wording: “in recognition of our changing world and evolving understanding of gender identity” (Morehouse, 2019). Again, it is worth noting that both schools work closely with partner women’s schools. In either case, it is clear that neither institution sees a problematic conflict between their historical missions, traditions, and values as men’s colleges and the admission of transgender men. The other two men’s colleges, Wabash and Hampden-Sydney, are reluctant to make public statements explaining their decision,

but from the limited available evidence it seems evident that there remains a commitment to biological determinism and traditional notions of masculinity.

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