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Making Barnard History Professor McCaughey

Project I: Majors and Careers, Barnard Class of 1910

Barnard College was founded in 1889. It is a private liberal arts college for women and is one of the Seven Sisters. It is located in New York City and is affiliated with Columbia University. For whom was Barnard intended? This is a question we have been asking in class since the start of the semester. We have concluded that it was intended for the wealthy daughters of the trustees and the people they associated with socially. Barnard’s classes were composed not of the students the trustees originally hoped for. Rather, they were full of girls from immigrant and American middle class families. One area we have not yet explored is what the trustees hoped Barnard students would pursue academically. The beginning of the twentieth century was not exactly a haven for female employment. Most women stayed home and raised children, and very few went off to work. If they did, it was because they did not have a choice financially. But with the start of Barnard College and the continued existence of other women’s colleges like Wellesley, female education and employment slowly became a more mainstream idea. Girls came to Barnard and graduated with degrees in History, Philosophy, and German. As a neuroscience major and researcher who hopes to become a doctor, I wondered what proportion of Barnard students completed STEM majors and what they ultimately did for their careers.

To explore this question further, I looked through Barnard’s Class of 1910 yearbook. Students participated in an array of extracurricular activities, from Glee Club to Philosophy Club, and majored in a wide variety of subjects:

Most popular was foreign language. I aggregated the data for this category- it includes German, Latin, French, and Romance languages. Perhaps foreign language was so popular because some Barnard students had European parents and/or grandparents. Second most popular was English, then Mathematics, then History. No more than five students majored in any other subject.

 In line with the analysis I did on current STEM education at Wellesley and Barnard for this week, I decided to look at the humanities/sciences major breakdown of the class of 1910. The humanities category includes Classics, English, History, Foreign Language, Music, Economics, and Philosophy. The sciences category includes mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, zoology, botany, sociology, and social science. I included sociology and social science in this category because they include elements of inquiry and research that are scientifically oriented, especially in the early twentieth century when women studying any science at all were scarce. Interestingly, there were no psychology majors in Barnard’s Class of 1910, perhaps because of the newness of the field. This stands in stark contrast to the high number of psychology majors in modern day Barnard. The data is as follows:

Sixty-seven of Barnard’s Class of 1910 graduates majored in the humanities, while only twenty-seven majored in the sciences. In my analysis on current STEM education at Wellesley and Barnard for this week, I discussed the difficulties of exposing students to the sciences in a college with a liberal arts curriculum that focuses so heavily on the humanities. Today, both Wellesley and Barnard have multiple programs and initiatives that make STEM education more accessible and interesting to students. However, in 1910, none of these programs and initiatives were in place. Perhaps students steered clear of studying science at a higher level due to fear of the unknown and unexplored, but were more inclined to study subjects like English and History because they were already comfortable with them after a standard high school education. Perhaps students refrained from specializing in STEM subjects because aside from education the career paths that followed were extremely male-dominated- medicine, psychology, and research were all mostly male professions in the early twentieth century and for decades afterward. All of these explanations could be factors underlying the disproportionate number of humanities majors in Barnard’s Class of 1910.

After looking at the major breakdown, I was curious what paths all of these women took in life. I looked through the Barnard Alumni Directory of 1925 to see where they ended up fifteen years after graduating from Barnard. Did they marry? Did they have children? Did they have careers? In almost every single case, the answer to the first two questions was yes. As for the third question, the answer varied. The data is below:

When reading through each student’s biography, I noticed that many of them hoped to work in the field or teach the subject that they were studying. Many math majors hoped to become math teachers, many English majors hoped to become English teachers, and so on. I was shocked by the number of women who married, had children, and never worked a day in the fifteen years since they graduated. Twenty-three members of the Barnard Class of 1910 did not have careers by 1925. In retrospect, it was naïve of me to think that all of these women were going to hold powerful positions in incredible fields, but as a prospective doctor I couldn’t help but be disappointed that even the woman who hoped to study medicine at Johns Hopkins married and stayed home. That being said, many women did go on to work as educators, saleswomen, and secretaries. One graduate of Barnard’s Class of 1910 even went on to become a lawyer! But for the most part, early Barnard women did not go on to be wonder women. This could be for many reasons. In the early twentieth century, it was socially unacceptable in many circles for women to practice professions. Many people believed at the time that the woman’s role is in the home with her children, and while that sentiment was vastly been eradicated, it still exists on a small scale in some areas of the United States today. Going to college at all was a huge deal for many of these young women, and they paved the way for later and current Barnard students to have the opportunities that my classmates and I have today.

Unfortunately for me, there seems to be no correlation between major and profession for the 1910 class. My hope is to examine STEM education and majors at Barnard and the careers that Barnard science majors ultimately pursue. My hope is that as we examine the later part of the twentieth century and female employment in the sciences and in general becomes more common, I will be able to do a more thorough examination of this topic.