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Making Barnard History

Professor McCaughey

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Ellen V. Futter

Biography

Ellen V. Futter is considered one of the most important Barnard presidents, though, interestingly enough, she became Barnard’s president almost by fluke. While she was initially appointed for an interim position as acting president, she quickly became not only the fifth president elected to Barnard, but also the woman who guided Barnard through one of the most tumultuous periods of its existence. From the interviews I have completed, as well as the research I have done, I have learned that Futter is remembered as the Barnard president who truly represented the mission to educate strong, brilliant, and bold women. She remained committed to Barnard’s mission during her presidency, even during a time when Barnard could have easily been subsumed by Columbia, and she never wavered on the value of Barnard’s autonomy and independence or on its value for the women who sought out a Barnard education.

Professor McCaughey’s “Biographical Outline” of Ellen Futter, as well as Rosalind Rosenberg’s *Changing the Subject,* provides a very important understanding of Futter’s time at Barnard. She was raised in Long Island; her father was an attorney and law professor (as well as a Columbia College alumnus), and her mother was a school librarian. Futter was the middle of three children, with an older brother and a younger sister. While she initially chose to pursue her undergraduate education at the University of Wisconsin, she decided to transfer to Barnard in the fall of 1969 for her junior year. Futter had actually been involved with Barnard for over 11 years when she was appointed acting president. During her time as a student at Barnard she was very involved, having been elected to Phi Beta Kappa and participating in groups such as the student government association. In April of 1971, she was elected as a student representative to the Board of Trustees and pushed to allow these student representatives voting rights. Futter then graduated from Barnard in the spring of 1971 as an English major, *magna cum laude*. In September of 1971, Futter went on to Columbia Law School, where she met her future husband, John Shutkin. Her engagement with Barnard lapsed for only a very short time, and, in February of 1972, Futter was elected as a voting alumna member of the Board of Trustees. After a three-year term, she was re-elected for a second term in 1975. After graduating from Columbia Law School in 1974, Futter was hired at Milbank, Tweed, Hadley and McCloy, but, as it turned out, she would not practice law for long.

As Futter continued serving on the Board, she was able to see first hand the problems caused by the current President, Jacqueline Mattfeld. While Mattfeld had been found by the search committee and elected for the position by the Trustees, as Rosalind Rosenberg writes: “They soon regretted their choice” (Rosenberg 289). In 1980, as Columbia elected Michael Sovern as the new president, Barnard took the opportunity for a “fresh start” and fired President Mattfeld. In her place, they appointed Ellen Futter, only 30 at the time, as the acting president, before a new president could be hired (Rosenberg 290). However, as Rosenberg understands it, “the following year, the search committee concluded that no other candidate could lead Barnard as well as Futter could” (Rosenberg 290). In May of 1981, Futter was elected as the fifth president of Barnard, and, as it turned out, she would lead Barnard successfully through some of its most difficult times.

Futter is best remembered for guiding Barnard through the discussion of merging with Columbia. Futter, at least as Professor Paula Franzese remembers it, was a “deft negotiator” and successfully ensured that Barnard remain autonomous, while continuing in a relationship with Columbia that would allow Barnard students to take Columbia classes, as well as take advantage of some of the greater resources Columbia had to offer. Franzese attributes this to Futter’s skills as a lawyer, but it may also have had to do with her relationship with Columbia President Michael Sovern, who was at one point her law school professor (“College Marks 25 Years of Coeducation”). Futter helped to carefully construct Barnard’s new agreement with Columbia after Columbia College officially resolved to begin admitting women in the fall of 1983. Despite this success, Futter was then faced with a new challenge—allowing Barnard to remain a visible and viable educational option for intelligent women seeking success. As Rosenberg writes:

Of women admitted to both Barnard and Columbia in 1983, 90 percent chose to go to Columbia. A difficult decade followed, as Barnard competed with Columbia for female students. … And yet, Barnard survived through the determined leadership of Ellen Futter in the 1980s and of her successor, Judith Shapiro in the 1990s. (Rosenberg 297)

It seems that it is thanks to Futter that Barnard so swiftly recovered from this difficult time. As her “Biographical Outline” notes, she increased fundraising efforts, worked to improve the curriculum, and met the “trustee-mandated limits” on both faculty size and tenure, all of which helped to secure Barnard’s success.

 Futter’s time at Barnard came to an end in 1993, when she decided to accept the position of president at the American Museum of Natural History. However, before her time ended, she oversaw the 1983 agreement that allowed Barnard students to take part in Columbia Division I sport teams, the decision to build “Centennial Hall” (now Sulzberger Hall) with the funds borrowed from New York State, and the 1989 centennial celebration. Futter, while certainly one of the greatest presidents of Barnard, was also the president who had to navigate one of the most difficult periods of Barnard’s history, one in which the very nature and purpose of Barnard’s mission and value was challenged and threatened. Futter, as a Barnard alumna, as a member of the Board of Trustees, and as president guided Barnard successfully through these times, allowing Barnard to remain the autonomous and thriving institution it is today.

Works Cited

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