Women's liberation isn't as big at women's colleges as it is at some coeducational universities, but it raises issues that can't be settled by adding a staff gynecologist or a course in the history of women. The search for a new female identity strikes the women's colleges at their ideological core: why a separate college for women to begin with?

Women's colleges, including those that have recently admitted men, can be classified according to why they were founded for women only:

First there are the Catholic women's colleges, founded to educate girls while protecting their chastity. Nuns administered sex segregation in the service of a tradition that prescribes two inflexible biologically based roles for women: ritual celibacy or repeated childbearing. As such, these colleges are the ideological bastions of resistance to women's liberation. Paradoxically, however, those that have joined the current movement to reform the Catholic church have produced some of our most radical feminists. Nuns like Sister Joel Read, president of Alverno College in Milwaukee, are ecumenical about sisterhood. They want to broaden the bond between women in orders to include all women everywhere. Alverno does everything that women activists want women's colleges to do. It has day care centers, women's studies, research on women, political action on behalf of women, community services for women.

Next—and very numerous—are the "finishing school" type women colleges which are typical of the South. They are frankly sexist in origin, founded to prepare girls for marriage and motherhood, or failing a suitable match, self support in a "feminine" job such as school teaching. The response of their students to women's liberation has lagged in part because they have attracted students from socially conservative families who see these colleges as a haven from campus
turbulence and the sexual revolution.

But the "finishing school" colleges are hard hit by changing styles of marriage, which make coeducational colleges better places to find a husband for those who still regard marriage as a primary vocation. And some of them are desperate enough to pitch the "female haven" appeal in rhetoric that co-opts the women's liberation "line." A recruiting brochure issued by the Southern Association of Colleges for Women promises that at a woman's college: "you can be your own woman, playing the dating game on your own terms...you do not have to stand in line behind men to use expensive scientific equipment, computer terminals, studios, the pool, tennis courts, or the gymnasium."

Finally, there are the colleges of the Northeast, the academically rigorous Ivy League Seven Sisters—Vassar, Smith, Wellesley, Mt. Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe and Barnard—all of which now admit male students. Philosophically they are the antithesis of the "finishing school" colleges: they were founded not to prepare women for marriage, motherhood or a special feminine role, but to give them the Harvard or Yale education denied them during the nineteenth century on the ground of their sex. For many years—possibly as late as the 1930s—they offered the most exacting college education a woman could get. Because they educated the movement's ideologues—Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem went to Smith, I went to Vassar—they should have cradled the new demand for sex equality. Instead, women's liberation has been an embarrassment to which they have reluctantly been forced to react. (See Kate Millett, "Libbies, Smithies, Vassarites," Change, Sept.-Oct. 1970.)

The record is startling. To check it quickly, I counted the references to colleges among the hundreds of events and statements in the Chronology appended to The Rebirth of Feminism, the exhaustive history of the new movement by Judith Holle and Ellen Levine published this spring by Quadrangle Books. Between 1961 and the fall of 1971, some things worthy of inclusion happened at or to the following institutions, in chronological order of first mention: University of Washington, University of Chicago, Grinnell, Cornell, University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University, New York University Law School, Harvard University, University of Michigan Law School, Princeton University, San Diego State College, City College of New York.

There were only two references to women's colleges:

May 9, 1966: Sarah Lawrence President Esther Bausch-Henish and Radcliffe College President Mary Bunting charged that American universities fail to recognize that many college-trained women want both families and careers.

January 1971: Goucher College (Maryland) offers course for women titled "Nuts and Bolts in Contemporary Society." Students learn small appliance repair, carpentry, plumbing and electronics.

This dismal record of the women's colleges was confirmed when I made a similar list of the institutional affiliations of witnesses before the 1970 House hearings held by Congresswoman Edith Green on Discrimination Against Women. People came or were quoted from the Universities of Wisconsin, Buffalo, Chicago, California, Illinois and Maryland; from Columbia, Carnegie-Mellon, Purdue, Cornell and Kansas State Teachers College. Victoria Schuck, professor of political science at Mt. Holyoke, and Alice Rossi of Goucher were the only witnesses from colleges founded for women.

Women's liberation first attracted national attention in 1968 when radical New York women picketed the Miss America contest in Atlantic City and got televised attention by threatening to throw their brassieres in Freedom Trash Baskets. (For the record, they didn't.) It erupted that year on the big coeducational campuses, often as an offshoot of radical movements for civil rights, peace in Vietnam or student power. From these campus hotbeds the new movement spread and so came ultimately to the women's colleges.

At Vassar, as well as at her sister colleges, there has long been a kind of intellectual disdain for the whole subject of the special qualities and duties of women. Because of this, the first consciousness-raising groups were small and so ill-understood by the administration that according to one possibly apocryphal story, President Alan Simpson didn't know there was such a thing. On being asked whether Vassar had them, he decided to investigate personally only to discover that he was not welcome because he was male.

Nor is it only male administrators who respond coolly to the new movement's unabashed emphasis on femininity. Many of the single women scholars who set the tone of the Ivy League women's colleges are now nearing retirement, and they patronize the young activists. Like a majority of women on most cross-sectional polls of opinion, they applaud the goals of women's liberation but deplore its tactics. "You can't expect us to get excited about the need for upgrading women," the dean of Mt. Holyoke remarked. "We've been saying this all along"—and, she implied, in more temperate prose.

Sometimes it looks like a generation gap, at other times a difference of personal style or even semantics. But the gulf is as frustrating as if it were on substantive issues and is well worth exploring. In 1970, for instance, the fledgling women's liberation group at Vassar protested that the Vocational Bureau was not actively "demanding" jobs for graduates commensurate with their education. "The Vocational Bureau
must stop telling women who want to be doctors that they ought to become nurses instead,” a student leader
demanded.

The director of the Vocational Bureau, a dedicated
and skilled personnel officer, indignantly denied that
she had ever discouraged any student from a medical
career. Jane Johnson and I were Vassar classmates and
I can’t imagine her ever doing such a thing—or
forgiving anyone for distorting a fact to make a phrase
“We haven’t been talking about equal opportunity all
these years, we’ve been doing something about it!” she
complained. Jane’s tact and gentle persuasion of
employers reluctant to take on women has simply not
been credited by the most recent crop of student
activists—not the fact that she and many of the rest of
us negotiated sexual politics to lead liberated lives long
before Kate Millett analyzed them.

How come the misunderstanding? I shall contend
that the answer lies less in fundamental ideological
differences than in the unexpected interaction of trends
such as the fluctuations in birth and marriage rates
since World War II, the sexual revolution of the sixties,
coeducation and changes in the socio-economic origins
of Ivy League women that occurred when the
prosperity of the fifties flooded them with so many
applicants that only highly motivated intellectuals got
into them.

What happened, I think, is that the Seven Sisters did
a right-about face following World War II. Up to that
point they had been dominated by social reformers,
dedicated to androgyn or minimizing sex differences,
and hopelessly upper class. The Old Feminists claimed
that “Women are people” and won the vote for women
by tactics more shocking and more dangerous to them
personally than the unladylike attention-getting
deVICES of “women’s lib”.

After World War II, they were overshadowed by
people who were establishment, sexist (“viva la
difference”), and concerned with making college a place
where daughters of self-made fathers could learn how to
meet and marry desirable husbands. Their code was an
endearing version of traditional sex roles. I have called
New Masculinism because it prescribes that women
serve men not by performing fixed duties such as
baking cherry pies (that’s Old Masculinism), but by
responding sensitively to the changing needs of
business or politics. New Masculinism produced such
women as Mary Lindsay (Vassar ’47) who devotes her
considerable talents to providing whatever ambience is
needed by John Lindsay (Yale ’44), the Mayor of New
York City. The Lindsays are typical of many
Vassar-Yale marriages of their time.

During the fifties, the Ivy League women’s colleges
came to be known as the “Seven Sisters.” What
McCall’s called “togetherness” and Betty Friedan
called the “feminine mystique” invaded the
curriculum. At one point, child study became the
biggest undergraduate major at Vassar, and young
families were installed as house fellows in residence
units to provide a “warmer, more home-like”
atmosphere. At Mills College in California, fondly
known as the “Vassar of the West,” President Lynn
White designed a “truly feminine” higher education for
women in child care, homemaking and such womanly
vocations as occupational therapy, medical library
work and domestic science.

The shift is not something I am making up out of
whole cloth by hindsight. I was so surprised at the new
domesticity that I returned from a visit to my daughter
(Vassar ’57) to write an article for the now defunct
American Mercury on the “New Look at Vassar.” I felt
that the New Masculinism of the student body had
something to do with the increase in the proportion of
students coming from public high school and families
with less income and education than in the more rigidly
class-and-income-stratified days before World War II.
There is a great deal of sociological evidence—that
upper-class women have always been freer from
domestic obligations and the constraints of
“femininity” than women who were brought up with
fewer privileges.

During the fifties, “good” women’s colleges had a
much higher proportion than before of students whose
parents were able and ambitious to give their children a
better education than they themselves had enjoyed.
Marriage had always been the way for women to “make
it,” but there seemed parents now who were quite
anxious for their children to succeed. During the fifties,
millions of families moved up the socio-economic scale
and brought with them their old high valuation of
domesticity and their traditional concern that: “boys
should be boys” and “girls should be girls.”

Meanwhile, early and almost universal marriage and
motherhood had consequences for the faculty as well as
the students. Fewer women went on to graduate school,
and those who did were more apt to become
encumbered with a family. Husbands and children
made it hard for them to teach in one-sex college
communities, and married women scholars followed
their husbands. Young men—often with unassuming
wives—were freer to move, and they began to replace
the older feminists at the lower faculty ranks of the
women’s colleges.

No one was immediately alarmed at the invasion.
New Masculinists were glad to see a more “natural”
mixture of the sexes. Old Feminists insisted that it
didn’t matter because competence was more important
than sex. Still, Marion Tait, Vassar’s dean emeritus of
faculty, insists that the college always preferred women
candidates to men. “The trouble in those days was that
we simply could not find them,” she recalls. “Few
women scholars were being produced, and times were
so good that those who were found it easier than formerly to get jobs elsewhere. Our sex ratio got badly out of hand."

But during the sixties, the scene shifted again. The whole society grew less marriage-oriented, and so did the Seven Sisters. The pace of social mobility slowed; fewer parents were as anxious for their daughters to make “good” marriages. The continuing crunch on admissions meant that more and more Seven Sisters undergraduates were superb scholars bent on graduate school. The pill and the sexual revolution were changing the terms of man-woman relations and reducing the urgency to marry young. More initially chose coeducational schools where the new “natural” relations between men and women supposedly prevailed. And it was in these coeducational schools that women’s liberation first appeared.

Why there first? Berenice Sandler, who pioneered suing universities for discrimination as government contractors, thinks that “the enemy was clearer” at the coeducational schools like Cornell or San Diego State College, which women forced to pioneer women’s studies courses. There were surrounded by men who regarded them as date bait or potential wage earners ready to drop out of college and support a male through school if the relationship became serious. Fewer of them came from upper class families with a tradition of personal choice of life style. Aristocratic traditions of freedom and autonomy were not as central to the traditions and institutions of these big coeducational colleges as they have always been at smaller, private, historically one-sex colleges in the Northeast.

At the coeducational colleges, women were often diverted into courses of study regarded as “feminine” or leading to feminine occupations such as teaching, and the women employed by the university were doing low prestige, underpaid “women’s jobs.” So women students there couldn’t escape daily reminders of the special and inferior role of women, and it moved the egalitarians among them to revolt.

When Betty Friedan talked about the feminine mystique, coeds at big universities knew what she was talking about. At Vassar, on the contrary, she was coolly received. Five years ago students there came to hear her out of intellectual curiosity, but they didn’t take what she had to say personally. Each student interested enough to listen thought she would find some way around the limitations of the mystique. She was not going to marry and move to the suburbs and rot. And even if she didn’t expect to remain single, as some of her teachers had, her daily experience at college reminded her that there were options. If she married, it would be on her own terms; and if those terms were domestic, it would be because she deliberately chose them in preference to other possible life styles. Coeds for the most part did not enjoy this luxury. They knew they weren’t free, and the activists among them joined the new movement.

Policymakers in coeducational institutions had few defenses against their attacks. They had known that race discrimination was wrong, but about sex discrimination they had to be educated. Some of them learned. “The fact is that higher education has been institutionalized on a male basis,” Alan Pifer, president of the Carnegie Corporation, told the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools last November: “The introduction of women into its positions of power upsets the system and causes difficulties.” It’s hard to imagine anyone in Pifer’s position perceiving in 1965 the institutionalization of sex role as a problem.

Policymakers in the women’s colleges were less
vulnerable because they weren't so innocent. They knew that women weren't really equal even in academia, but they were New Masculinists whose attitudes were shaped by the sexist fifties. They accepted the situation, or hoped for gradual improvement in the lot of women in the distant future. When I interviewed Mary Bunting and Esther Raushenbush in 1966 for Born Female, both were as defensive and fearful of quotation as liberals charged with racism who aren't quite sure how they feel about Negroes personally. And just as self-deluding liberals early cited the many successful blacks as evidence that the blacks could make it if they tried, so policymakers in women's colleges cited women achievers as evidence that any woman could do anything she wanted to do if she would only shut up and work at it. From this aristocratic point of view, expressed articulately in Midge Decter's "The Liberated Woman" (Commentary, October 1970), the women activists could be dismissed as uncouth and ineffectve whiners. Things weren't that bad, the Seven Sisters policymakers said to each other—and most importantly, of course, to themselves.

What they didn't like to admit is that the women they can cite to prove that sex barriers can be surmounted turn out to be a singularly well-heeled and socially privileged lot. Indira Gandhi made it to the top as the daughter of India's independence hero. A high proportion of U.S. women legislators broke into politics as widows of politically powerful men. And we might never have had woman suffrage at all if rich women like Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont had not been able to support the fight with capital inherited from males. After suffrage was won, the money went to the League of Women Voters, which promptly adopted the well-bred disregard for the de facto subordination of women which is the establishment posture of the Seven Sisters to this day.

As the sixties progressed, it was obvious that the Seven Sisters weren't with it. Alarmed that they might lose their attraction for the most highly motivated college-bound women, all of them considered getting men on campus. The remedy was enthusiastically promoted by the men who had been hired on their faculties in the fifties. Some had acquired tenure and influence and were openly talking among themselves about the need to get rid of the "old girls" just ahead of them. Many frankly admitted that they wanted to teach men.

This was the state of affairs in the Seven Sisters in 1968 when the women's liberation movement appeared, a cloud on the horizon the size of a man's hand. Occupied with coeducation, administrators at first paid little attention to the groups on campus. Even as late as 1970, Alan Simpson was soliciting opinions from faculty and alumnae on whether women were as valid a focus for study as the blacks, and if so, whether women's studies should be segregated in a special center or reflected in existing course content. Bryn Mawr ultimately recognized the new interest by inviting Kate Millett to teach a special course on women.

This school year there are more courses and fewer doubts. The number of courses qualifying as women's studies has almost doubled. Derenice Sandler, executive associate of the Association of Women's Colleges, has counted seven hundred all over the country, and the women's colleges now have their share. Suzanne Keller is professor of sociology at Princeton, but her somewhat guarded response could be duplicated among women scholars everywhere: "Women's studies? Last year I was against them, but this year I think I am for them."

Barnard is launching a Women's Center with a library on women, career planning facilities and a dozen courses with titles such as "The Role of Women in Modern Economic Life" and "Images of Women in Literature." Vassar has six courses on women, one of which is "Women in American Law and Politics' taught by a woman added to the political science department in part for that purpose. But more is going on than gets into the catalogue. The political scientist who teaches the course on civil liberties doesn't talk about the civil liberties of women, but his students remind him of the omission by electing to do term papers on the topic.

In 1971 and more in 1972, women's liberation has become a permanent feature on all Seven Sisters campuses. Male administrators are under fire. There is general agreement now that no man can be expected in the future to get the presidency of any of the Seven Sisters without facing articulate opposition on the ground of his sex. During the sixties, Alan Simpson replaced Sarah Blanding at Vassar, Charles DeCarlo replaced Esther Raushenbush at Sarah Lawrence, and in 1969, Harris L. Wofford, Jr., replaced Katharine McBride at Bryn Mawr. Academic women say that Wofford is the "last male replacement." Smith is looking for a woman to succeed Thomas Mendenhall, now 62.

There's also a new sensitivity about sex ratio on the faculty. While many have a majority of women on the faculty, Wellesley is the only one of the seven with more tenured females than males. Most campuses now have special studies under way to see whether women applicants are getting a fair shake, and the percentages hired are passed around like major league scores.

Most young college women take the objectives of women's liberation for granted. They now assume they have control over their own bodies, access to any kind of work they want or any life style they wish. The fair question is how many of them are joining women's
liberation as a movement, wearing feminist buttons, seeing putdowns all around them, joining consciousness-raising sessions, mounting protests against the firing of women or for day care centers and abortion clinics. More are doing such things this year than last, and some are emotionally involved because they feel men have been “invading” the campus.

“The first men weren’t a problem,” a Vassar student testified at open hearings held by the trustees. “We could absorb them into the female scene, and we stood a good chance of sensitizing them to the needs of women. But now that there are so many of them, they’re taking over!” Others wonder whether the presence of men has diluted scholarship support of women. Administrators worry about issues that would never have arisen if there were no men around to measure sex equality, as such as whether women students need “protecting” and if so whether male or female guards should be hired to do it.

The consciousness of the men who have pioneered coeducation at women’s colleges is being raised quite as painfully as the consciousness of the women. At Vassar and at Sarah Lawrence there were fears that the first men wouldn’t be as bright as the women. They were—and in addition their interests are proving not so different from the women’s, as some of the young male faculty may have hoped. “I was surprised to find that the men are just as interested in, say, peace, as the women students,” a male Vassar professor commented.

“I guess I was thinking like a male chauvinist,” he added, demonstrating his new-found sensitivity.

Plumbing and pregnancy have not presented the insuperable problems middle-aged administrators foresaw. Young men and women have had no trouble in sharing bathroom facilities in dormitories, and anyone so old-fashioned as to worry about premarital sex is apt to be rewarded with a patronizing smile from undergraduates. But noise! Ah, that’s another matter.

One-sex dormitories have been getting noisier for years, but coeducation makes it worse. Women who opt for women’s dormitories say that men are just too noisy. But men think that the women are noisy, too. Coeducational dormitories have required some of the accommodations of marriage, and for some the adjustment has been negative.

Most students and faculty accept coeducation as inevitable, but whether at Princeton or Vassar, the men seem to be happier about it than the women. Mt. Holyoke, Smith, Wellesley and Bryn Mawr are glad that they can have men from neighboring colleges on campus without admitting them to full student citizenship by granting them degrees. They want to remain essentially women’s colleges.

So do Barnard and Radcliffe. Barnard students aren’t sure they want closer relations with Columbia College across Broadway. “The courtship is over!” an exasperated Columbia proponent of union declared in a recent debate. “Barnard has to realize that it’s rape or nothing!” The remark was reported by a Barnard woman as an example of the aggressive, sexist attitudes from which Barnard women want to protect themselves by remaining separate.

The Seven Sisters were founded to help women overcome the discrimination against them. Five years ago, most students and faculty didn’t think women needed a one-sex haven any more. Now they are not so sure. “While the conditions that historically justified the founding of women’s colleges have clearly changed to some extent,” the Mt. Holyoke Trustees Committee on Coeducation concluded last fall, “they remain in the less tangible but still potent areas of attitude, feeling, spirit. There remain, in short, cultural reasons justifying the existence of colleges primarily for women.”

Similar reasoning dominated the April 1971 Smith College report that recommended against granting Smith degrees to men and for limiting the number of men on campus. They were influenced, they say, because “at the present time, when the status and roles of women in American society are being reexamined with a view to their improvement, an important option that should remain open to women is attendance at a college of the highest caliber in which women are unquestionably first-class citizens.” Women’s liberation has raised the consciousness of the “old girls” who dealt with discrimination by denying it existed.

Vassar admits men to degrees and is moving toward a 50-50 sex ratio in 1975, but Alan Simpson promises that this won’t mean “male-dominated coeducation:”

“We are going to do everything in our power to make this a college where the sexes are on a footing of genuine equality and where the women are not pushed around by the men.” A vocal minority at Vassar dissent. “It is not the purpose of a college to be a microcosm of society,” Nancy Schrom, a recent graduate now teaching at the college testified, “Vassar needs to be dedicated to feminism.”

Most feminists, including myself, believe that men and women ought to be able to live together on an equal basis. Most of us are leary of quotas. We’re for a feminist bill now in Congress that would forbid universities to limit their enrollment on the basis of sex. We’re delighted to see how many young people can live comfortably on coeducational campuses without parietal rules. But consciousness raising has shown that sex integration isn’t as easy or “natural” as it looked. Women’s liberation has further demonstrated that liberation from sex stereotypes is one of the things that women are going to have to do by and for themselves, and where better than in a women’s college founded for that express purpose?