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*Western Washington University*

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GEORGE MARIZ

# Women in Honors Education: The Case of Western Washington University

GEORGE MARIZ

WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

This essay is concerned with women and their educational experience in an Honors Program, and with their educational choices. It deals briefly with the history of women in higher education in the Western world and in the light of this history compares WWU Honors women with historical trends, with men and women students in the institution, and with students nationally in terms of major choices and career aspirations. It is not an attempt to view Honors women's education comprehensively nor to look at WWU women along side Honors women more generally. In fact, it is not possible to do so, as figures on major choices among women in Honors Programs nationally are not available. It does try to answer some specific questions—What majors do Honors women at Western Washington University chose, and why? Do women regard their general education in ways different from men? More generally, are there uniquely feminine issues as regards their educational choices?

It is interesting to note that in an arena where there is a great deal of research regarding the character of the Honors experience and the value it adds to a student's education that so little has been done as regards Honors students' choices of majors and their ideas more generally about their educational experiences. There are no aggregate national data on major choices for Honors students, much less for women students. Thus this essay can offer only limited conclusions as regards the experience of Honors students, and it can compare the experience of women only with national figures on women's choices of majors and with male student in the program. It is, however, the author's hope that Honors Directors and Deans will hereby be stimulated to ask questions of this sort of their own programs and to contribute to broaden the discussion on the nature of Honors education.

Any assessment of women in higher education must examine the historical place they have occupied in education more generally in Western societies, and in the case of this essay, particularly with reference to the United States, in both theory and practice. Indeed, it is only after education became higher education in the sense in which that term is now commonly used and understood that is possible to say much that is meaningful about women in education. From the earliest days in

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the Western tradition, ideas about education dealt with the education of women, and in his *Republic*, Plato included them in the community and opened educational opportunities for them on the same basis as men. Renaissance Humanists considered the education of women to be pivotal in maintaining the moral health of society, though they always considered women's positions in education and life more generally to be subservient to men's. Vives, Luther, Melanchthon, Erasmus, and More all wrote extensively on the topic.

Of course real world opportunities never keep pace with theory in Europe, and it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that women began to gain access to higher education, and then only in the face of entrenched opposition on the part of men, particularly in terms of training for the professions of law and medicine, where they faced formidable obstacles. It was therefore not until the late nineteenth century that discussions about women had much practical relevance.

In the United States there was less theorizing about education for women until the twentieth century, but opportunities were significantly more abundant. Public education for women, but not higher education, existed from the nation's inception, though the opportunities for women differed from those for men. Dames schools on the English and European model existed in colonial times, providing training in the "practical arts" (e.g., sewing) along side instruction reading, writing, and music. Boston public schools admitted girls beginning in 1769, a practice that spread throughout the New England states after the Revolution. By the 1830s coeducational primary schools were becoming more numerous, moving westward with the frontier and statehood, and coeducational high schools were increasingly common. Mark Twain's depiction of schools in *Tom Sawyer* and many of his other novels, and stories of girls and boys receiving instruction together reflected an American reality that would have been virtually unimaginable to Europeans. In his *Democracy in America* Tocqueville noticed young women in the schools and was struck by their self-confidence and brashness.

Likewise, women in the United States found opportunities in higher education much earlier than their counterparts in Europe, and while women were struggling in Britain to be allowed to take examinations that would qualify them for admission to the universities, and even as women in Germany battled to be allowed to attend classes as auditors in universities, women in the United States were already being admitted to colleges and universities. The first coeducational college, Oberlin, was founded in 1833, and Cornell University, founded in 1865 with an odd public-private charter, admitted anyone, regardless of gender, who wanted to follow the courses of study it offered. Mount Holyoke, the first women's college, opened in 1837, with Vassar following in 1861. More than a dozen women's colleges were founded in the two decades immediately after the Civil War, and their numbers grew rapidly until by 1950 they reached their high-water mark of more than 260. Some public universities admitted women very early, with the University of Utah setting the pace in 1850. Other states created normal schools before the Civil War, with the first, in Lexington, Massachusetts, opening its doors in 1839. Women always were enrolled in these institutions and often constituted a majority of the student body. By 1861 there were more than a dozen normal schools, and their numbers grew rapidly after 1865; there

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were more than 100 in 1875, and on the eve of America's entry into the First World War there were more than 230.

Very simply, women were a presence in higher education earlier and in much greater numbers in the United States than in Europe. Yet the situation in the United States resembled that in Europe in many ways. While teaching as a profession was open to women, few others were. Some medical schools openly denied women admission on the grounds that they would be depriving men of places, and others regarded the admission of women as a waste, as they would almost certainly become mothers and thus not have time to practice the profession for which they were trained. Such prejudice persisted into the 1970s. The other professions, in fact most other fields of study, remained closed to them. Nonetheless, women continued to enter higher education in ever larger numbers, and by 1950 they constituted roughly 40% of all enrollment, a figure somewhat skewed by the large number of men who began to attend institutions of higher education on the GI Bill immediately after World War II. At the large public universities, women tended to enroll in what had become the traditional field of study for them, education, until the 1960s. In smaller, private institutions, especially women's colleges such as Vassar, Smith, and Mount Holyoke, they tended toward a much greater variety of majors and were much more likely to enter medicine and the natural sciences than were women students in public universities.

There are symmetries and asymmetries between the experiences of European and US women in higher education. When they first began to enter universities in Europe women's aspirations were very similar to men's. They sought entry to the professions, particularly medicine. Women in the United States who attended women's colleges resembled women in Europe in terms of academic aspirations. Such choices may initially seem surprising, but these women came overwhelmingly from professional families, where gendered expectations and career paths for women seem not to have been so pronounced as in other segments of society. Those in public higher education in the United States, which more likely meant normal schools than anything else, found themselves early shunted into fields that would soon become "traditional" for women, especially teaching and nursing. Whether in the United States or Europe, women found the road to the professions very difficult. In a few instances men welcomed them, and faculty members sometimes fought to advance female education; almost inevitably these were senior male faculty. More often both male students and faculty were hostile and through informal and formal means made the road very rough. Some women were able to survive the rigors of a demanding education compounded by the difficulties of artificial obstructions, but most were discouraged or opted for other routes through higher education. Until well after the Second World War this situation prevailed in both Europe and the United States.

Very slowly after 1945 the situation began to change. In limited numbers women began to make inroads into professional areas, most particularly law and medicine, and by the 1960s in both the US and Europe increasing numbers of women were entering these fields. In Europe the admission of women to these areas continued—and to an extent continues—at a more moderate rate, with some notable exceptions such as dentistry in France and the law in Great Britain—while in the US the pace of change began to quicken quite dramatically

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In the United States the 1970s landscape of higher education experienced a transformation in terms of the gender composition of the student body. By the later part of the decade the number of women in higher education surpassed the number of men, and they now have constituted a majority of enrollment for more than two decades. The figures demand somewhat closer scrutiny, as in the 1970s women were still much more likely than men to be part-time students and to be enrolled in non-degree programs. Nonetheless, by 1980 it was indisputable that they constituted the majority of the higher education population. Beginning in the 1970s, they also became a substantial portion of the enrollment in law and medicine, and by 2003, there were approximately as many women entering law schools as men, and their numbers approached those of men in medical schools.

Once women became a majority in higher education a number of issues began to emerge, some of which called into question the very foundations of educational thinking: how women were treated in class room settings; their ideas about the ends of education itself; the place of work, profession and family in their lives; among many others. It is important to note that prior to the late twentieth century, almost all thinking about these matters was based almost exclusively, whether tacitly or explicitly, on a male-gendered foundation. In light of this lack of symmetry between the theoretical base of higher education and the part women are now playing, it is important to ask questions in light of women's ideas and experience. Do women perceive the educational process and their role in it in some specifically female way? Do men and women choose different degree fields, and is there a gender basis to major selection? Do women's ideas about general education and training in a discipline differ from those of men? The experience of women in Western Washington University's Honors Program provides a small but nonetheless revealing laboratory in which to ask and to answer these questions, if only in the most provisional way. By exploring Honors women's roles in reforming general education and their choice of majors, it is possible to get an idea about their thinking in these areas to make a few tentative conclusions.

The first of these areas is in general education. Beginning in September 2000 Western's Honors Program began a review of its general education program with particular attention to its first-year sequence required of all entering first-year students and to its other general education courses that served as introductions to the disciplines. At the time the sequence was a year-long set of interdisciplinary humanities courses that began with the most ancient parts of the Western traditions such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer, and the Hebrew Bible, and concluded with modern authors such as Kafka, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, and T.S. Eliot. It had been in place for well over a decade, and while there was no evident discontent with it, either among students or faculty, it seemed to the director to be an area ripe for review.

The director asked program faculty whether or not they thought the sequence needed modification, and to suggest any changes they would like to see implemented. They responded that it might be a good idea to ask students to weigh in with their ideas about the general education program, and eventually the process developed into a suggestion that student reflections on their general educations would make an interesting and informative presentation at the National Collegiate Honors Council annual

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meeting. The director asked faculty to nominate junior-level students whom they believed were particularly well suited to reflect critically on their experience in the Honors general education curriculum and to recommend changes they thought would benefit students in the program. After discussions with these faculty involving several nominees, the director chose three students, two female and one male, one in English and art, a second in sociology, and a third in theater. All received a specific assignment: they were each to examine their general education experience in Honors carefully and critically, and to write a short paper (not more than 2,500 words) describing that experience and recommending any changes they thought appropriate. They would present these papers at the annual meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council in Chicago in 2001—by this time all three students would have entered their senior year. They received no other instructions, except that they were to work independently of one another, and they were encouraged to think broadly and to understand that their opinions would be heard and that there was absolutely nothing sacred in the then-current Honors general education program. They were free, in fact encouraged, to give vent to anything negative they found in this part of the program and to recommend any changes they believed might be either necessary or beneficial. The director made it very clear to these students that their opinions were extremely important in rethinking Honors general education and that there definitely was no party line that they were expected to follow.

They carried out their charge carefully and with relish, and their papers, while alike in many ways, differed in some important respects. All were highly satisfied with their experience in Honors general education courses, and all three praised the first-year sequence in particular. They enjoyed the content, the instructors, the sequence's interdisciplinary approach, and its emphasis on discussion and paper writing. They were also unanimous in regard to other facets of the sequence: they believed it immersed them in the culture of Honors and it introduced them to other Honors students. In addition, they indicated a high degree of approval as regarded other general education classes in Honors, though they were not quite as enthusiastic about these classes as about the sequence. When asked to recommend changes, their responses differed by gender. The male student, the theatre major, was satisfied with all the courses and recommended no changes. On the other hand, both female students were interested in seeing some modifications in the sequence. In particular, they recommended that non-Western material be integrated into these courses.

In discussions subsequent to the return of all parties to campus, all three students indicated they preferred to have the sequence divided in such a way as not to compromise the integrity of the current material—they specifically opposed the transformation of a Western humanities sequence into a World humanities sequence (as changes were finally implemented, Western subject matter was covered in two terms and the third quarter dealt with non-Western cultures). The students did not recommend additional material on race or gender in the sequence (in response to specific questions from the Director, one of the women students noted that “we already get enough of that stuff”).

All this information was then circulated to the rest of the Honors student body, except to those then enrolled in the sequence, in a dual form: a narrative describing

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the process of developing ideas for possible curricular changes that might result from the students' recommendations, and a survey asking students if they would like to see such changes in the sequence implemented. The response was overwhelming favorable, essentially unanimous, to changes along the lines the female students had suggested. These suggestions were then embodied in a series of curricular changes that were submitted to the appropriate curricular committees, and they received approval in time to be implemented for the 2003-2004 academic year. The program is now surveying students in the new sequence in regard to their satisfaction with the courses and will ask for suggestions in terms of fine-tuning the restructured first-year sequence. In the entire process of curricular change it is important to note the sum of things. The experience and ideas of three students is scarcely persuasive, but the high degree of agreement between their recommendations and the response of a much larger student body with fairly broad experience in general education at the college level makes a more compelling case. These students are satisfied, indeed enthusiastic about the essentially traditional general education they are receiving, and while they want to see changes, those changes are not wholesale.

A second set of issues arose as a result of the observations of one of the female students about the program's general education courses outside the first-year sequence. Honors has a full suite of classes that introduce students to the disciplines, e.g., psychology, sociology, economics, philosophy, and so on. The three students who presented at the Chicago meeting all indicated their experiences in this portion of their Honors general education were quite good, and all gave both the instructors and the classes themselves very high marks. One woman student had questions about them. She noted that these courses, while good in themselves, neither depended upon nor in any systematic way built on the first-year sequence, nor did they provide a foundation for the typical experience for Honors students in the third year, the Honors Seminars. This student expressed an interest in finding a way to create some integration or bridge between the first and third year, i.e., between the sequence and the disciplinary courses. The other students agreed with the first student's opinions, but they also had no specific suggestions as regards a direction for change.

The survey of the student body found no uniform opinion, and the director, after very considerable discussion with the Honors Board, the faculty advisory body for the program, is currently engaged in conversations with department chairs, as representatives of the disciplines, to discover if there is a way to integrate the sequence with the program's introductory disciplinary courses, or the seminars, or both.

A new chapter of this story has begun recently. Within the last year, the program has created a student board, and it has renewed the discussions concerning the general education program. This body represents a much larger sample of the program's student body, and attendance at its meetings is in the dozens, and it thus contains a much wider spectrum of student opinion than the small sample that recommended changes in general education earlier. While it is far too early to say definitely where the student board, on which women students are very prominently represented, will take these discussions and the recommendations they will make, as this is written they are on the road to making the required sequence larger and moving from three to four required classes and adding traditional Western cultural content to the classes.

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A look at Western Honors women students' choices of major proves to be another interesting area. There is a good deal of local and national evidence available to study this matter, though the data have not been uniformly collected, and one must be careful with the figures. With reference to both local and national trends, however, it is possible to look at developments over a considerable period of time. The time frame this paper employs, with some exceptions noted below, is the three decades between 1970-1 and 2000-1. There are both practical and substantial reasons for choosing these dates. For example, there is a good deal of evidence, and it is easily accessible. More important, it is during this period that women became a majority in higher education. This is also an era in which higher education itself underwent very significant changes in terms of the degree preferences for both genders, and in terms of women entering what had been traditionally male fields.

At the national level information is available on virtually all graduates, and there is as well information on the gender of graduates in most fields. For Western Washington University there are data for graduates and currently enrolled students by declared major (not all current students have declared majors), for both Honors and non-Honors students, and there is information on the gender of Western graduates by major since 1983. Using this information it is possible to create profiles of both alumni and current Western Honors and non-Honors students and to compare them, and to compare Western data with national figures. For the graduates of Western's Honors Program the director can supplement this information through correspondence and conversations with a number of alumni. Obviously much of this last is anecdotal and while some of this evidence may be suggestive, it does not have the same reliability as the other data and any reader must regard them as suggestive rather than conclusive.

Before going further, it will be helpful to locate Western Washington University in the larger context of higher education in the United States and to situate the Honors Program within the university. As of fall quarter 2004, the university had about 12,500 students, the vast majority of whom were undergraduates (there were a total of approximately 600 students in all graduate programs). The freshman class in September 2004 had an entering high school grade average of about 3.55 on a 4.00 scale, and average SAT scores of about 1140 on the re-centered scale. In terms of gender distribution, the university's first-year class was about 55% female and 45% male, which was very close to the university's gender distribution in entering classes over the past three decades.

The comparable information for the Honors Program was as follows: the entering class in September 2004 had an average entering grade point of about 3.91 and an SAT average of slightly over 1320 (the grade point average and SAT scores of students in the entering class have remained virtually constant over the last decade, allowing for changes when the SAT was re-centered). In terms of its gender composition the class was about 65% female and 35% male. These too, were pretty typical percentages, but there had been quite significant variation by class in terms of gender distribution; at the extremes, one entering class was composed of 81% females and 19% males, while another was 59% female and 41% male, the lowest percentage of women students in any Honors first-year class. In every year for which it was possible to obtain information, women not only outnumbered men in the entering

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class, but in every first-year class the percentage of women beginning in the program was higher than the percentage of women in the university's entering class as a whole. In terms of graduation, women constituted about 62% of the graduates since 1970, and while that number is slightly lower than the percentages in the program as a whole, it is higher than the percentage of women in the university's graduating classes in general.

The most interesting data, in terms of both national figures and comparisons within the university concern choices of major among women Honors students. It is important to note here that in some cases precise assessments of difference and similarity are difficult owing to a number of factors. Universities now collect a wider variety of information than formerly, and of course, universities have changed in the period being used for comparison. For instance, in 1970-1971, Western's Department of English offered six separate majors. It now offers five and three additional areas of program concentration supplementary to the major. Only three of these majors/programs are continuous across the period being considered here. Some of the old majors have ceased to exist or they have moved to other departments such as journalism, where in turn, they have undergone significant modifications and no longer can be considered the same major. The new majors/program concentrations in English are in some cases unlike anything that existed previously, e.g., film studies and linguistics. It is difficult in some cases to compare local and national data, owing in some instances to differences in methods of gathering data, and in others to changes in nomenclature or to dissimilarities in classification.

To cite but a few relevant cases, in 1975-6, Western had no collegiate school of business, and there were only limited major options within its existing Department of Business. Many students with this interest completed a major in the Department of Economics (then in the College of Arts and Sciences, and now in the College of Business and Economics). To note another problem, national statistics consider psychology as a separate category. At Western it is grouped with the social sciences, and in a recent collegiate reorganization of the university it became part of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, though there were serious discussions within the department about its placement. A substantial number of its faculty wanted the department to be housed in the newly created College of Sciences and Technology. For the purposes of this essay, psychology is grouped with the social sciences, and it is considered as such in reporting data on student choices of major and degree field. Yet another distinction concerns the major in education, historically among the most popular degree options for students. Though Western began as a normal school, it now offers few majors in education as such, with degrees in elementary education and interdisciplinary child development standing as two of the few options that bears the title, education major. All students who are certified to teach must complete an academic major in one of the disciplinary departments, and though the university awards these students the BA in Education degree, they have typically completed a major in some field such as psychology, English, or political science. One program in the Woodring College of Education, Adult and Higher Education, offers work only at the graduate level and has no undergraduate students. Since the university reports all degrees in education aggregately, without regard to major field, level, or

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specialization, this paper follows that practice. It thus appears in reporting student preferences that this major is the single most popular or among the most popular student preference, but in fact, there are several separate majors in this category at Western.

The lack of consistency between local and national reporting practices and the unique characteristics of this university require some additional qualifications. The university has a nearly unique college of environmental studies, Huxley College of the Environment; there are fewer than twenty such colleges in the United States, and Huxley College, created in 1968, is one of the oldest in the country. In addition, Huxley was from its inception devoted to the study of the environment, while most others became colleges by adding the appropriate curricula and functions to an already-existing unit, e.g., a college of forestry or a college of agriculture. Huxley also offers majors which resemble to some extent degree programs in other universities in biology or chemistry departments, or in colleges of forestry or agriculture. In other cases, the Huxley majors are unique or at least have titles dissimilar from those offered at other institutions. Consequently, it can sometimes be difficult to make comparisons between Huxley majors and those offered at other institutions.

In yet another respect Western's reporting practices differ from national ones. In national statistics degrees in history are reported under the designation "social sciences and history." The classification follows national trends in the secondary school curriculum, where history and social studies, including sociology, anthropology, economics, geography, and political science, are taught in conjunction with one another. The practice of reporting their collective enrollments masks some very significant changes in student preferences. While enrollments in this combined group of majors decreased by about eighteen per cent in the period from 1970-1971 to 2000-2001, the decline was far from uniform across all the disciplines. The number of students majoring in history declined by forty-four per cent, while the number of students taking degrees in sociology fell twenty-three percent. During this period sociology surpassed history among students taking degrees in the so-called social studies disciplines. Political science, whose enrollments were static over this period (growing by about one per cent), is now the leading degree choice among students in this area. Economics has grown as a major preference by about twenty-three per cent in this period. At Western, history is counted among the humanities, and in this essay it is considered a humanistic discipline, while geography, sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science are counted as social sciences. As this essay proceeds to look at changes in local and national changes in degree preferences, the above considerations are important to keep in mind.

Between 1970-1971 and 2000-2001 several national degree trends emerged. The number of students majoring in education, the humanities, and the social sciences, including history, all declined. Students migrated to other areas, in some cases with notable suddenness, whose enrollments rose dramatically. Education was the most prominent casualty among the changes in major preferences. It had dominated higher education up to that point: in 1970-1971 more than 21% of all undergraduate degrees granted to students were in education. By the middle 1980s business emerged as the most popular major, claiming 24% of all bachelor's degrees. The

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humanities and social sciences also suffered significant attrition. Students did not abandon these fields altogether, and as groups of majors they continued to hold student interest as degree options, but they no longer commanded as large a following.

In the same period women became more prominent in many fields, especially medicine and the law (between 1970 and 2000 the number of women physicians rose more than eightfold, while the number of women lawyers increased more than fourteen fold). Changes were evident in a number of other areas as well. In 1970-1 women obtained 13.7% of all degrees in the natural sciences, but by 2000-2001, they received 41% of the bachelor's degrees in those fields. Comparable figure for other areas included mathematics, 38% in 1970-1 and 48% in 2000-1, biological sciences, 29% and 59%, and in engineering 1% and 18%. These figures should not mask other trends. Notwithstanding their gains in these fields, degrees granted to women in many areas remained and continue to remain very low. In 2000-2001 fewer than 1% of women graduating from colleges and universities received bachelor's degrees in mathematics. Only 1.6% of women graduates received computer science degrees in the same period; by contrast, 5.7% of men did. In 2000-2001 women constituted 57.2% of all bachelor's degrees but only 38% of those in mathematics, engineering, biological sciences, physical sciences, and computer science. A majority of the degrees granted to women in these fields were in the biological sciences. In total, degrees in natural and applied sciences, mathematics and applied technical fields constituted only about 10% of all degrees awarded to women.

There are no aggregated national data for degrees granted to women in a number of fields before the 1980s, and so it is not possible to write with authority in terms of women's degree preferences with the same precision across the entire period from 1970-1 to 2000-2001. National statistics for 1985-6 indicate that without regard for gender, the most popular degree options in descending order were business administration, education, social sciences and history, health professions (this designation includes a large number of degree options, including nursing, health services administration, communications sciences and disorders, and medical laboratory technologies among others), psychology, and engineering. By 2000-2001, there had been some changes, and the most popular major fields without regard to gender were business administration, education, social sciences and history, education, psychology, and health professions. For women the most popular options were business administration, education, social sciences and history, psychology, and health professions.

In citing degree preferences for Western Washington University, it is important to remember that the character of the institution makes some kinds of comparisons difficult or impossible. For instance, the university has no majors in the health professions, save for a small program in speech and hearing sciences. It has a few, very specialized engineering programs. Likewise, while it qualifies as a "comprehensive" university in terms currently in use at the national level, it began as a normal school, and it now has a distinctly liberal arts orientation. Within the state Western is known as "the" liberal arts university—no cognitive dissonance intended—and it is overwhelmingly undergraduate. Outside education, the university has few professional programs. Finally, changes in local terminology make it difficult at times to make compare local and national figures. As noted above, it is not possible to

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cover the territory described above for Western in the same way as it is when dealing with national figures, as the university did not record degree by gender until the middle 1980s, and so the bench marks for the university in the following comparisons are 1983-4, 1990-1 and 2000-1. In terms of student preferences, the university's most popular majors in 1983-1984 were elementary education, psychology, business administration, special education, and visual-communication/education. In 1990-1 the preferences were, in order, business administration, psychology, environmental science, and elementary education. For women only, the most popular degree options were elementary education, psychology, English, business administration, and speech-communication (not to be confused with speech and hearing sciences). During this period there were some changes in the education major, though they do not alter the overall pattern in a significant manner.

By 2000-2001 these degree preferences had changed slightly. For the institution as a whole the most popular degrees were, in order, elementary education, business administration, English, psychology, and communication (formerly speech-communication). For women only, the most popular majors were elementary education, psychology, English, business administration, and political science.

In citing statistics for the Honors Program it makes more sense to look at degree preferences aggregated across a larger time span. As Honors is small, constituting slightly more than 2% of the university's total enrollment, annual figures might convey wild swings in student preferences from year to year, and so, the following statistics have been aggregated for the years 1990-1991 to 2000-2001. This is a sample of well over than two hundred majors (some students had more than one major). For these years, the most popular degree options among Honors students without regard to gender were environmental science, history, English, biology, and mathematics. For women, the most popular majors were environmental science, biology, English, and (tie) chemistry (including biochemistry) and political science. Clearly degree choices here show a disproportionate choice of majors in the natural sciences among Honors women students. Not only were the sciences the most popular among majors women, women were more likely to major in the natural sciences and mathematics than men. Women received an astonishing 94% of the environmental science degrees granted to students in Honors, 79% of those in biology, and 50% each of those in chemistry, physics, and mathematics. During this period 36% of Honors women took degrees in the natural sciences as opposed to 29% of the men. About 30% of women students majored in the humanities disciplines (including the fine arts), and about 20% majored in social sciences, with the remainder widely distributed among various applied disciplines, including business administration, speech and hearing science, and education.

The foregoing raises some interesting points both as regards ideas about general education and degree preferences. In so far as the evidence allows one to draw conclusions, Honors women's ideas about the general education that they are receiving do not differ in any significant way from men's. They do not believe that Honors general education requires significant alteration. While the numerical evidence is not large enough to be compelling, Honors students, and a substantial majority of them are women, they are highly satisfied with a traditional general education.

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Women writing systematic treatises on this area might come to different or at least more elaborate conclusions than those who were required to reflect and write on their experience in college, but these women looked to be very much in the main stream. It is certainly true that much has changed in both the superficial and deep structures of general education in the past generation, and someone thinking about general education in 2004 is not looking at the same practices or courses as an observer or participant in the process in say, 1960, particularly as concerns the social sciences and the humanities. If the canon is wider, or the variety of history being taught is different, these are still literature and history.

A more compelling issue has to do with major preferences among Honors women. Women in Honors at Western resemble no group so much as those who were just entering higher education in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and those in private women's colleges in the United States during the 1800s, i.e., in that period when women were making their initial forays into a new educational world. They were interested overwhelmingly in traditional male subjects, and they had serious, if often frustrated, and quite conscious aspirations to careers in traditional male-dominated fields. Women in Western's Honors Program demonstrate a preference for the professions and are very interested in medicine, university teaching, the civil service, and law. In proportion to their numbers, they apply and are accepted into law school at about the same rate as men, while they are more likely to apply and be accepted to medical school than are men. Women in Honors at Western outnumber men by about two to one, but in applying to and being accepted into medical school, they outnumber men by about three to one.

Why do so many women in Honors at Western choose science degrees or majors that prepare them for specific professions? On the basis of the evidence, it appears that there is no single answer. In terms of science, the university's reputation in environmental sciences and the presence of a college devoted solely to the study of the environment are no doubt important. Likewise, charismatic professors in the natural sciences, though not necessarily women, draw students. It may be that the university simply attracts students interested in the sciences. Informal discussions between the director and students have elicited no broad trends. Some women science students indicate that their families have encouraged them in this area, while a very few others are interested in this area in part because it is male dominated and financially rewarding. Others, a majority, indicate they are pursuing science majors for a number of other reasons, including personal interest, a strong orientation toward environmental issues, and faculty role models. Anecdotal conversations with the director indicate that they believe science majors and careers in science are simply natural pursuits for them, and few if any express a desire to challenge accepted stereotypes or batter down the walls of exclusion, which many of them do not appear to believe exist any longer. Indeed, among those who have expressed an opinion to the director, they regard any field as open to them, and they believe their choices of degree as no more gendered than those of male students.

Whatever the reasons, the prevalence of women in science in Honors is a striking fact. Nor does the preference for science majors among women appear to be abating. Among women students in the program who have declared majors about 35% are

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in the natural sciences, and for undeclared women students expressing a preference, 40% have indicated an interest in a science major, with about 20% citing humanistic disciplines and a scant 12% opting for social science majors. The rest are scattered across a wide variety of applied disciplines.

The evidence on which this piece rests is very narrow, representing the experience of a single program during a fifteen-year span, a relatively short time period. Nonetheless, the evidence is striking when compared with national figures. It remains to be seen whether the experience of the Western Honors Program is unusual or unique, or whether it resembles the record of other programs. How different Western's women Honors students are from women in other Honors Programs is an open question, but at the moment the program appears to be playing a disproportionate role in producing the next generation of women scientists, possibly in distinctly larger numbers than has been the case heretofore. There is no question that *something* is going on here, but the real questions are (1) *what, precisely* is going on, (2) what more general lessons can Honors programs draw from these data, and (3) what are the implications for the future? There is much to consider in this area. It is the author's hope that this piece will stir interest in other institutions to conduct similar studies and to ruminate on the issues raised here.

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The following web sites contain a great deal of useful information on women in the professions, particularly law and medicine:

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