

The Not-so Silent Generation

*Higher Education for Women in Postwar America,
1945–1965*

by Linda Eisenmann

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Linda Eisenmann's work is a welcome respite from too many contemporary evaluations of women and higher education in the 1950s and the early 1960s that resemble the very deficiency models they decry. Eisenmann sets out to convince the reader that during those decades women (and some men) in the academy argued for, struggled for, and achieved greater opportunities for women, rather than simply submitting to male hegemony, as is commonly believed. In general, she succeeds, although some of the book's arguments need more explicit links to each other in order to provide a compelling interpretation.

What is most intriguing about this book is the argument that continuing education programs—now often marginalized as potential but rather ineffective revenue-generation units—have strong roots in the work of women educators, including those programs connected with Commission on the Education of Women of the American Council on Education during the years 1953 to 1962. The women educators in those programs provided nascent efforts to understand the roles of college women and alumnae beyond the traditional roles of marriage and the family, without diminishing the importance of those roles. Such efforts also surfaced in the work of the American Association of University Women and

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the now defunct National Association of Deans of Women, as well as the President's Commission on the Status of Women (1961-1963) appointed by John F. Kennedy. As a result, women educators developed programs during the 1960s at four institutions of higher education (the Universities of Minnesota and Michigan, Sarah Lawrence and Radcliffe Colleges) that, according to Eisenmann, adapted arguments about women and society to programmatic efforts to educate women for careers either after college or after their children were raised. Initially, the women advocated for women on the basis of individual choices, yet slowly they came to see the deeply embedded structural characteristics of American society that prohibited women from achieving equality. Thus the genesis of the current feminist movement in higher education came about as women realized that it was not their psychology, their need to adapt as individuals to society, that needed fixing, but rather that political, social, and economic structures needed fixing.

Although the continuing education programs were generally unable, given constraints on resources and programmatic foci on helping women, to produce research, Eisenmann offers a convincing argument that there was slow but sure development of research and scholarship on the status of women. Scholarly works in the early 1950s began a process of furthering knowledge about women and society, and to some degree each of the groups that Eisenmann examines furthers that research. The result is an invisible college that informs women in their pursuit of a more equal society; its public face is Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique*, and its scholarly (and today, less recognized) face is the work of such scholars as Virginia Senders at the University of Michigan, who was also a key person in the development of the continuing education program there.

The book's evidence is, well, arresting, other than a spate of factual errors in a few pages in Chapter One—such as referring to Levittown, New Jersey (it was in New York) and referring to a table containing only data up to 1950 as if it explained data in the 1950s. Eisenmann shows a talent for bringing together archival sources and oral-history interviews to tell the story. Unfortunately, an analysis of themes in the immediate post-World War II period—patriotic duty, economic participation, cultural role, and psychological needs—that she offers in the introduction fades after chapter one, and it is only with careful reading that the reader is able to discern how those four themes evidence themselves in the discussion of women and higher education in the remainder of the book. The themes themselves have strong relationships to other historical works on women in the United States, beginning with Linda Kerber's work on the virtues of Republican motherhood in the early years of the nation, suggesting the possibilities of Eisenmann's interpretation. Simply inserting the names—which she initially identified with italics—at appropriate places would have helped strengthen her interpretation. Thus, while her concluding arguments—that previously unrecognized efforts in continuing education programs were the bridge between

the “energetic women” of World War II and the activists of the late 1960s—are valid, the reader may be left wondering how the themes played out for the late-1960s activists, much less for the women who established and sustained the continuing education programs (except perhaps their career counseling efforts).

That said, this work offers, finally, an explanation about women in higher education in what has seemed to be a mysterious time, the 1950s and the early 1960s. *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America* shows that for women, and, as we are beginning to learn, for African Americans, the 1950s were not a silent decade. (Of particular note, Eisenmann addresses both white and African-American women in her discussion and analysis.) More likely, it was a decade when resistance took different form, chilled by the Cold War and ignored by the national polity. There is an art of discovery in good historical interpretations, and Eisenmann has discovered, and shared, a form of agency for women in higher education that will require scholars to revise their notions of the period between the end of World War II and the beginning of the more activist struggles for equality of opportunity beginning in the 1960s. [nea](#)