

# Why a Women's College?

*Brought to you by Collegewise counselors  
(and proud women's college graduates):*

**Sara Kratzok and Casey Near**

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Fifth Edition

February 2016

## **A note from the authors**

In the time since we wrote this guide, women's colleges have been in the news a lot. So, we thought we'd review the latest updates in the world of women's colleges with some tips on how to consider this news in your college search. The content of the guide hasn't changed, but we hope this update will help you see women's colleges in a new light.

In March 2013, news broke that Sweet Briar College would be abruptly closing its doors at the end of the academic year. This wasn't the first, nor the only, women's college to close since we wrote this guide, but it captured the media's (and higher education's) attention. While the story ended on a hopeful note -- alumnae rallied to keep the college open -- it sent waves through the community about the future of women's colleges.

Yes, these institutions struggle, but they're not alone. College closures are on the rise, shifting from 10 annually to nearly 15. And though a handful have been women's colleges, that's not a uniting factor. Colleges close for a variety of reasons -- some are considered too rural, others are seen as too small, and many simply do not have the endowment needed to sustain themselves. As you'll see in this guide, women's colleges contain multitudes. Yes, they have uniting factors. But, the institutions have unique histories and potentially divergent futures.

Women's colleges are also grappling with what it means to be an institution defined by gender. As transgender issues take center stage, women's colleges have begun conversations about whom their communities include. While each school in this guide has approached this topic differently and taken different stances in their admissions policies, most have veered toward opening their doors more broadly. For the sake of space, we won't delineate each specific policy, but we do encourage students and counselors to take the time reading statements issued by each institutions, as they reflect both the deeply entrenched philosophies of these schools, as well as their vision of the future.

Our hope is that this guide can help students navigate those futures, keep women's colleges on the table, and include women's colleges in the broader conversation about the purpose, value and future of the liberal arts college landscape.

All the best,

Sara and Casey

February 2016

# How to use this guide

## **This one goes out to the ladies**

We wrote this guide for all young women interested in pursuing higher education. Full stop. Yes, researchers tell us that less than 5% of high school-aged women will even consider applying to women's colleges, but we wrote this for all young women who are thoughtfully analyzing ALL of their college options.

We also wrote this guide to help arm high school guidance counselors, independent college counselors, and community-based college advisors with valid, interesting, and perhaps even funny information about women's colleges they can share with their students.

So, if you're a high school student reading this guide, our goal is to provide you with an alternative viewpoint on your college search, one that you may not have previously thought about. Even if you don't end up applying to a women's college, we hope that will be because you thoroughly weighed the pros and cons of a single-sex education. If you don't end up believing that a women's college is the best fit for you, that's ok- they're not for everyone.

## **Why we wrote this guide**

There's a lot of misinformation out there about what it's like to attend a women's college, and, as two *exceedingly* proud women's college graduates, we're here to dispel all, ok, maybe most, of that. We want

to help high school students figure out if a women's college is the right fit for them. And, if so (and we really hope so), how they can tailor their applications to single-sex institutions.

We'll start by describing what a women's college is and how to tell if you're a good match for this particular educational environment. We'll also explain the pretty remarkable byproducts that are frequently correlated with attending a women's college (the proof is in the pudding, right?). And after that, we'll talk about the myths and stereotypes that are most often associated with single-sex colleges.

We want high school students to be aware of the full range of post-secondary options available to them, and for them to ultimately apply to colleges that they really want to attend. If you do that, you'll make us proud.

### **Where this information came from**

Sara Kratzok is a graduate of Wellesley College where she has volunteered as an admissions interviewer and application reader. Casey Near attended Scripps College and was an admission officer at Mills College. Both Sara and Casey majored in American studies, and work every day to prove that humanities majors are, in fact, employable. As you've probably figured out, this information is largely informed by our experiences.

With our educational and professional backgrounds in mind, we'll share both the qualities that women's colleges are looking for in their applicants, and who is most likely to thrive on an all-female college campus.

We've been members of their admissions offices, students on these campuses, and in the minority group of high school women considering applying to women's colleges. We've culled some research on single-

sex education and tried to break it into palatable and entertaining bites for you, our dear reader. This is by no means an exhaustive guide to all women's colleges, but our goal is that this handbook is an easy-to-read start for any student or counselor looking for more information about the benefits of single-sex education.

## 2. Signs that a women's college might be a good fit for you

### **So, what IS a women's college?**

One of the first, most important, factors to note about women's colleges in the United States, is that they are all, pretty much universally, small liberal arts colleges (otherwise known as SLACs). So, if you know that you're looking for the type of education offered by a SLAC, then you can rest assured that you'll find the same benefits at a women's college.

But, what if you're not there yet? Let's start by going over what SLACs (generally) offer:

- Small to medium size student populations (some have less than 1,000 students, many have 1,000-3,000, and there are some with more than 5,000 students).
- Small class sizes, with the occasional large lecture course
- Lots of personalized attention from professors and campus administrators
- A broad range of academic majors, from computer science to medieval studies and pretty much everything else in between
- A focus on sharpening your reading, writing, and critical thinking skills
- A generally more liberal leaning student body (don't worry though- there are conservative students at SLACs, you just might have to look a bit harder to find them)

And you'll typically find all of these things at women's colleges.

But, women's colleges are not one-size-fits-all. Each has its own strengths, and it takes time to learn about their individual offerings and unique programs. This is where researching individual colleges, talking to current students and alumnae, and visiting campuses (when possible) becomes important.

In addition to their identities as SLACs, women's colleges also create their own unique identities around a variety of factors, including:

- **Geography:** there are women's colleges located throughout the country (see page 14)
- **Academic Programs:** they each have their own most popular majors and specialized offerings
- **Cross-registration options** and even dual-degree programs at other (often coed) campuses
- **Master's programs** (some have them, some don't): post-graduate programs at women's colleges are generally coed
- **History:** each campus has its own story- and many women's college campuses tell their history through extraordinary architecture and landscaping
- **Religious Affiliation:** some women's colleges used to be religiously affiliated, and some still are
- **Traditions:** from high teas, to class tree days, women's colleges often have an appreciation and nostalgia for the generations of women who have come before.
- ...and much more!

So, you should definitely be researching a variety of women's colleges to learn more about which ones might be the best fit for you.

# 3. Why might you want to attend a women's college?

## **Signs that a women's college is right for you**

Women's colleges often emphasize community, support females in nontraditional fields (such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math or STEM), and have a strong attachment to their traditions and alumnae networks. If this resonates with you, it's a good sign.

If you get goose bumps when you hear about the woman who founded an institution or organization, if annual baccalaureates and weekly teas sound like, well, your cup of tea; if you ever thought about pursuing a career in business or science and hated being the one girl in your AP statistics or economics class; if you come from a big school and want a college where you can actually get to know your classmates, or if you go to a small school and want your college community to be similarly close-knit, then there might be a women's college for you.

# 4. Common qualities of strong women's college applicants

While many of these qualities are just downright great qualities for any colleges, we've narrowed it down to a few that stand out in this pool in particular. These are qualities that will serve you well not only in applying to women's colleges, but also (just as importantly) once you're there.

Just like at any admission office, women's college admission officers are looking for a wide variety of young women. Some will be leaders, some will be followers, and some will just do their own thing all together. But these three qualities tend to rise to the surface amongst even the most diverse of applicants. And if you can express these qualities throughout your application process (or feel like these characteristics describe you completely), women's colleges will be knocking at your door.

## **1. Pioneering Spirit**

We don't mean that you need to have packed up a covered wagon and headed west (though if you've done that, you're a true pioneer and should probably write your college essay about that). We mean pioneering in terms of being among the first to do something difficult, important, or just plain impressive.

The truth is, behind every women's college is a long, long history of female pioneers. Women who saw a place for fellow women in higher education. Women who founded colleges, long before women even

had the right to vote. And women who, through the years, forged the way in industries and professions that had long been dominated by men – politics, business, math, and science.

So, it comes as no surprise that women’s colleges today still relish the same forward thinking spirit in their applicants. Sure, it may not look like trekking into the west to found a college, but maybe you started the first video game club at your school, and take pride in being the only female gamer. Or maybe you created your own column in the school newspaper. Or you love to jam in an all-female rock band.

Whatever it is, women’s colleges celebrate women who felt comfortable enough in their own skin to go against the norm. And they know that those young women will bring that same spirit to college, and continue to blaze trails in whatever field they choose.

## **2. Curiosity**

Though this one has a lot of overlap at any liberal arts college, women’s colleges in particular look for young women who are curious. These young women are the front-seat learners and the hand-raisers. They ask questions. They are open to new ideas. And they perpetually ask, “why?”

These are the students that stay after class to ask that extra question. They want to dig deeper into a topic, and they want to approach it from all angles. They love learning about the Defenestration of Prague or the woman behind DNA sequencing, even if it’s not on the next test. Young women who are curious just can’t turn off that lingering feeling of wanting to know *more* about the world around them.

## **3. Communication Skills**

An important quality to bring to any small classroom experience is the ability to express oneself—be that in writing, or through a well-articulated comment. And students who get into women’s college (and

succeed once they're there) demonstrate this eloquence early on. This doesn't mean you have to write 20 page essays on Thoreau with ease, but it does mean that you can articulate your thoughts clearly, whether that's in organic chemistry or British literature. This is probably one of the many reasons women's college graduates tend to excel as leaders; the experience prepares them to stand up for themselves, and articulate their opinions. But, just as importantly, they pair that expressiveness with curiosity, and listen just as much as they share.

## Current List of Women's Colleges

Here's a current list of the women's colleges in the United States. If you're viewing this on a computer, then you can click on the college names to go directly to their respective websites. Happy web surfing!

[Agnes Scott College](#) (GA)

[Alverno College](#) (WI)

[Barnard College](#) (NY)

[Bay Path College](#) (MA)

[Bennett College](#) (NC)

[Brenau Women's College](#) (GA)

[Bryn Mawr College](#) (PA)

[Cedar Crest College](#) (PA)

[College of Saint Benedict](#) (MN)

[College of Saint Elizabeth](#) (NJ)

[Cottey College](#) (MO)

[College of Saint Mary](#) (NE)

[Colorado Women's College of the](#)

[University of Denver](#) (CO)

[Columbia College](#) (SC)

[Converse College](#) (SC)

[Douglass Residential College](#) (NJ)

[Hollins University](#) (VA)

[Judson College](#) (AL)

[Mary Baldwin College](#) (VA)

[Meredith College](#) (NC)

[Midway College](#) (KY)

[Mills College](#) (CA)

[Moore College of Art & Design](#) (PA)

[Mount Holyoke College](#) (MA)

[Mount Mary College](#) (WI)

[Mount St. Mary's College](#) (CA)

[Notre Dame of Maryland University](#)  
(MD)

[Russell Sage College](#) (NY)

[St. Catherine University](#) (MN)

[Saint Joseph College](#) (CT)

[Saint Mary's College](#) (IN)

[Salem College](#) (NC)

[Scripps College](#) (CA)

[Simmons College](#) (MA)

[Smith College](#) (MA)

[Spelman College](#) (GA)

[Stephens College](#) (MO)

[Stern College for Women](#) (NY)

[Sweet Briar College](#) (VA)

[Trinity Washington University](#) (DC)

[Ursuline College](#) (OH)

[Wellesley College](#) (MA)

[Wesleyan College](#) (GA)

[Westhampton College of the](#)

[University of Richmond](#) (VA)

Note: At the time of publication, some of these colleges had begun referring to themselves as "primarily for women" instead of "women's colleges." If you find that in your search, it means the school may have some men at the undergraduate level, but still serves mostly women. It's a definition that's a bit in flux, and we've done our best to capture it here.

## **What to do once you get to a website**

Start by reading about the history and mission of each school. Those things are particularly important to understand at women's colleges. Read the profiles of women who attend and what they have to say about their experiences. Read about the professors, the academic programs that interest you, and the alumnae (that's the female plural!) who recount their time in college. Now ask yourself: do you feel even more interested in attending? Do you wish you could be there right now just to see what that environment is like? Are you already imagining yourself on campus as a *freshwoman*, taking in all of the learning inside and outside of the classroom?

If the answer is, "Yes!" then carry that excitement with you through the application and interview process. Your thoughtful and sincere desire to attend will be evident.

# 5. (Real) Life at a women's college

## **The myths, debunked**

Why take the time to go over these? As alumnae of women's college and former women's college admission reps, these are things we've heard about the women's college experience. And while it pains us to give these stereotypes more of a spotlight, these are the honest questions and statements we often faced as students and employees of these institutions.

### **You'll be unprepared for the coed ("real") world.**

False. Women's colleges are not nunneries. There are male faculty and staff, and many women's colleges are part of co-ed consortiums -- some even a few feet away.

### **1. It will be full of sleepovers and late night pillow fights.**

False. If you want it to be, sure! But, let's be honest, that only really happens in sitcoms and romantic comedies.

### **2. You'll have no social life.**

False (noticing a trend?). Women's colleges are small communities, and because of that, they oftentimes plan many events on campus -- or organize ones off campus. It's just about taking advantage of the opportunities. If student government hosts an off campus ice skating social, are you any *less* likely to go if you attend a women's college? Unless you have a dreadful fear of ice skating, then, mostly likely not.

### **3. But, how will you find a significant other?**

Yes, some people still find a partner in college, but most people meet them out in “the real world”. And this experience prepares you for just that. You’ll meet people in college through friends, at events, club outings, or even in class. Otherwise, there’s always online dating!

### **4. Catfights happen every day.**

False. And we’re pretty sure the Real Housewives TV series is 99% to blame for this one. But really, there’s a reason so many women’s college mission statements emphasize community and empowerment. They also recognize that when women (and people, in general) believe in each other and support one another, a lot more gets done.

### **5. Everyone becomes a lesbian.**

Colleges in the United States are forbidden from taking campus statistics on sexuality. If they did, however, they’d likely find that these numbers are roughly the same at most small, liberal arts college -- and that the number of people who are open about their sexuality has a lot more to do with the comfort and safety of a campus. If this is still a concern for you, try walking around a campus, staying overnight, or talking to current students.

# 6. Life after a women's college

## The outcomes

No discussion of women's colleges is complete without a discussion of the *vast* data out there about the benefits of women's colleges. And we're not just throwing in a few vague, "studies show" statements to bolster this handy guide. The legacy of women's college graduates -- and the paths they have forged -- cannot be denied. So, without further ado, the data:

- Women's college students are **able to observe women in top positions** in their own institutions -- 90% of women's college presidents are women, and 55% of faculty are women.
- Women attending women's colleges are **1.5 times more likely to major in math, science, or pre-med** than women at co-ed schools.
- Women's college graduates make up 2% of the college graduate population, yet comprise more than **20% of women in Congress and 33% of the women on Fortune 1000 boards**.
- Far more students and alumnae at women's colleges reported **having frequent interaction with their professors** than those at co-ed institutions (according to a recent [study](#) at Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research).
- Women's college graduates have accumulated a variety of "firsts", including the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, the first woman in a presidential cabinet, and the first woman to serve as the general of the U.S. Army.

And, of course, some **famous alumnae** of women's colleges:

- Benazir Bhutto, First Female Prime Minister of Pakistan (Radcliffe College)
- Julia Child, Chef (Smith College)
- Hillary Rodham Clinton, Former Secretary of State (Wellesley College)
- Gabrielle Giffords, Politician (Scripps College)
- Katherine Hepburn, Actress (Bryn Mawr College)
- Jhumpa Lahiri, Author (Barnard College)
- Pamela Melroy, Astronaut (Wellesley College)
- Nancy Pelosi, Congresswoman & Former Speaker of the House (Trinity Washington College)
- Diane Sawyer, Television Reporter (Wellesley College)
- Meryl Streep, Actress (Vassar College, formerly all women's)

## 7. OK, you're convinced: How can you make your application shine?

Putting together great college applications is a topic on which we could go even longer than we can about women's colleges. Rather than present you with a treatise on the subject here, we'll give you a few specific do's and don'ts when applying to women's colleges, then direct you to some other resources if you're looking for even more help.

### **DO:**

1. Be yourself. The most important advice we give students when completing applications and essays is to avoid trying too hard to impress admissions officers. If you would never say the words, "Traveling to Costa Rica exposed me to a rich array of cultures and experiences," don't say it in your college essay. Sentences like that tended to induce eye-rolling from us and our colleagues when we worked in admissions.
2. Talk to current students. They'll help you more fully understand campus life, which will make it easier for you to decide if the college is a good fit. Admissions officers can help facilitate that interaction; so can college Facebook pages and websites. It never hurts to send a message to the admissions office about getting in touch with current students.

3. Articulate why you think a women's college, and the particular school to which you're applying, is a good fit. Many women's colleges ask you this question directly in their application supplements, but there are also ways to share this information in your interview and interactions with admissions officers.
4. Visit, if possible. Often the strongest responses to supplemental essays come from students who can cite information gleaned from campus tours or their conversations with current students or alumnae (which can also happen off-campus).

#### **DON'T:**

1. For the love of all that you find holy, please don't call a women's college a girls' school in your application (or, really, ever). Girls' schools only come in the K-12 variety. Refer to single-sex colleges as women's colleges.
2. Fall victim to the stereotypes (though if you've read this far, you totally wouldn't do that, right?). Don't say you're choosing a women's college because you're looking for a convent-like environment or because you want to avoid men; that's just not an accurate depiction of the women's college experience.
3. Make it sound like your decision to apply was not your own. One of your co-authors was bribed to apply to a women's college by her high school guidance counselor. Did she mention that in her application? Nope.

If you're looking for more help with your applications, start with the expert on your campus—your high

school counselor. She or he can give you great advice, and it's always good to lean on people who know you.

The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC, for short—we're card carrying members) has free resources and advice [here](#). Make sure you scroll through the entire page and find the section for seniors on college application advice. If you still want even more help, head over to our [blog](#), check out some of the [products](#) in our store, or consider working with one of [our counselors](#).

## 8. Further reading

If you're feeling like you just can't get enough of all this women's college talk, we'd recommend heading on over to these websites, which are some of our favorites.

1. The **Women's College Coalition** is an online community to which all women's colleges belong, and the site is a great place to go for data, the history of women's colleges, and a directory of schools: <http://www.womenscolleges.org/><http://www.womenscolleges.org/>
2. Most women's college websites have a section dedicated to "why a women's college" and these are some of our favorites – though all deserve a shout-out, really!
  - a. Barnard:  
<http://barnard.edu/admissions/campus/a-womens-college><http://barnard.edu/admissions/campus/a-womens-college>
  - b. Judson:  
<http://www.judson.edu/content.asp?id=85917><http://www.judson.edu/content.asp?id=85917>
  - c. Mt. Holyoke:  
[https://www.mtholyoke.edu/about/womens\\_college\\_research\\_study](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/about/womens_college_research_study)[https://www.mtholyoke.edu/about/womens\\_college\\_research\\_study](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/about/womens_college_research_study)

d. Simmons

<http://www.simmons.edu/undergraduate/admission/womenscollege/><http://www.simmons.edu/undergraduate/admission/womenscollege/>

3. Huffington Post runs some nice articles in their education series, many of which focus on women's colleges, and are written by women's college students and alumnae.

- a. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-propsner/choosing-a-womens-college\\_b\\_3737253.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-propsner/choosing-a-womens-college_b_3737253.html)[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-propsner/choosing-a-womens-college\\_b\\_3737253.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-propsner/choosing-a-womens-college_b_3737253.html)
- b. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elisabeth-pfeiffer/womens-colleges\\_b\\_2277623.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elisabeth-pfeiffer/womens-colleges_b_2277623.html)

There are also some great lists on BuzzFeed that we won't link to here, but we highly encourage you to Google them in your spare time.

# 9. Let's review: so, why a women's college?

## **WHO applies to women's colleges?**

Curious, passionate, pioneering young women.

## **WHAT are women's colleges?**

Small liberal arts colleges (that admit only women).

## **WHEN will you know if a women's college is right for you?**

If you're already looking at small liberal arts colleges; if you're seeking a community in your college environment; or if you're just not finding enough colleges with female campus leaders-- these are all signs that women's colleges might be a great fit. And you'll really know for sure after you've visited or talked to current students.

## **WHERE are women's colleges located?**

EVERYWHERE. Ok, fine, we don't know of any in Alaska... or a few other states. But, they are all over!

## **WHY should you apply to a women's college?**

Because you want to receive a stellar education while surrounded by similarly awesome and motivated ladies. And you enjoy the feeling of community that comes with being among the 2% of college graduates who attended women's colleges. Blaze that trail.

## Top 10 Things to Keep in Mind If You're Considering a Women's College:

1. Accept what they are not (convents, brothels, lesbian love dens, etc.).
2. There will be men- professors, staff, classmates, Pasta Bob in the dining hall!
3. It will be different than a coed college, but different doesn't have to be bad.
4. You may have to work harder to find a significant other.
5. You may not have to work as hard to find lifelong friends.
6. It will inspire you. Every. Day.
7. Your alumnae network will be unlike any other.
8. Yes. There are parties.
9. They attract *all* types of women.
10. Your experience is what you make of it.

## **About the Authors**

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## **Want More?**

Collegewise is a private college-counseling company that holds two beliefs: (1) The college admissions process should be an exciting, adventurous time for every family, and (2) accurate, helpful college information should be made available to everyone. So, even though we are private counselors who work with families who can afford to hire us, we also enjoy working with anyone who is interested and willing to listen, whether we're writing, speaking, or teaching as much as we can. If you'd like to learn more about how we can help your family or your students enjoy a more successful, less stressful college admissions process, just reach out and ask.

### **Our website**

[www.collegewise.com](http://www.collegewise.com)

### **Our college counseling programs**

<https://collegewise.com/college-counseling/>

Collegewise counselors work with students in person and online.

### **Our online store**

<https://collegewise.com/store/>

The online store has guides, videos, and other college planning resources.

### **Our blog**

[wiselikeus.com](http://wiselikeus.com)

We share free advice every single day (including Christmas Day, Arbor Day, and Super Bowl Sunday).

**Our free email newsletter**

<https://app.e2ma.net/app2/audience/signup/19920/11809/?v=a>

Get our free advice delivered to your inbox.

**Contact us**

[www.collegewise.com/contact](http://www.collegewise.com/contact)