In the fall of 1969, Yale — one of the last all-male holdouts of the Ivy League — accepted women as undergraduates for the first time. Numerous challenges, from the institutional to the attitudinal, awaited these earliest female Yalies as they carved new space for themselves on a centuries-old campus. Helen Price ’17 explores the obstacles these trailblazing women faced, while highlighting their remarkable successes in improving the University for generations of students to come.

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A cartoon published in the *New Yorker* in October 1969 depicted two young women, apparently at a cocktail party, with the caption “Princeton, did you say? How interesting. I’m a Yale man myself.” The image emphasizes the women’s long hair and short dresses, the joke clearly arising from the contrast between the attractive and self-assured coeds, and the gentlemanly and aristocratic “Yale man” ingrained in the collective American psyche. What the cartoon reflects, however, is that there was no way to define oneself as a “Yale woman.” When the first female undergraduates arrived on Yale’s campus in the fall of 1969, they became part of an institution that had no established place for them. They had few role models and few female peers, and they were faced with both daunting characterizations as “supervwomen” and the pressure of being expected to overcome almost 300 years of institutional male domination without difficulty or complaint. That so many of these women thrived in spite of the practical, institutional, and attitudinal obstacles they faced, thereby paving the way for generations of “Yale women,” speaks to their resilience; indeed, the admissions committee “preselected for survivors.”¹ In the first four years of coeducation — the time it took for the first class of freshmen women to graduate — Yale changed tremendously, in large part due to the presence and efforts of these women. This transformation heralded a new, more inclusive era at Yale, the benefits of which we still reap today.

While women had been able to attend Yale as graduate students since the late 19th century, by the 1960s, Yale was one of only three Ivy League colleges that still did not educate undergraduate women in any capacity.² The idea of coeducation at Yale was first raised in an informal capacity in 1953, by Dean of Admissions Arthur Howe, but it did not become a serious proposition until 1962, when the Yale College faculty agreed with the report of the President’s Committee on the Freshman Year that Yale “had a national duty to provide the rigorous training for women that we supply for men.”³ Recognizing that Yale was late to a national trend – 75 percent of U.S. colleges were coeducational by 1965 – and therefore potentially losing talented applicants to rival schools, the administration began to explore the idea of a merger with the all-female Vassar College. Vassar, however, declined Yale’s proposal in favor of admitting its own men in 1967.⁴ Yet enthusiasm for coeducation at Yale did not die down after this setback. To show their support, the Yale Student Advisory Board’s Committee sponsored a Coeducation Week in early November of 1968, which brought 750 women from 22 different colleges to Yale, where they lived in Yale dormitories and attended classes.⁵ The week was a huge success. One student, Paul Taylor, wrote in the *Yale Daily News* that the presence of women on campus had caused the men to realize they had “existed here abnormally for so long.”⁶ The day after Coeducation Week ended, 1,000 students demonstrated on Cross Campus in support of coeducation, and the day after, Yale University President Kingman Brewster announced that women would be admitted to Yale as undergraduates in the fall of 1969.⁷
The response from women nationwide was resounding. Yale received 2,847 applications for the 230 places for women in the Class of 1973, making the acceptance rate less than 10 percent, half that of the men’s. In a separate application process, 358 women enrolled as sophomore and junior transfer students. The 230 first-year women were joined by 1,029 men, making the freshman class only 18.3 percent female. The women who had transferred to the Classes of 1972 and 1971 were even more outnumbered.8

The expectations of Yale’s first women were unrealistically high. Jonathan Lear ’70 labeled them “the female versions of Nietzsche’s Übermensch” in the April 1969 edition of the New York Times Magazine.9 Upon arrival, they were treated as novelties. Media reports published exaggerated photos of male students eyeing the coeds, although many women did experience a great deal of attention. Floy Brown Kaminski ’73 found that “the male residents of Pierson College had clearly delved into the ‘Facebook’ of the time,” thereby discovering her status as “Little Rock’s Junior Miss 1969,” and writing a song to serenade her in the dining hall.10 Barbara Wagner ’73 reported that in a large lecture that took place in a room with wooden seats, the entire room creaked whenever a woman asked a question, as everyone turned to look at her.11 In a questionnaire distributed to the first female transfer students at the end of their first semester, one woman simply wrote, “We are a curiosity.”12 Over time, this phenomenon would cease—but not before these earliest female students braved and overcame significant practical, attitudinal, and institutional challenges over their years at Yale.

PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

Many of the women’s challenges arose from practical difficulties involving facilities and housing. Yale had received a grant of $500,000 from the Ford Foundation to help pay the initial expenses of admitting women. Of that, $150,000 was earmarked for the renovation of Vanderbilt Hall, the largest dorm on Old Campus—and the only one with bathtubs—where the freshman women would live. The transfer women, it was decided, would be allocated all-female entryways in each residential college.13 The Committee on Coeducation recommended that better street lighting be installed, more police officers made present on campus, that “wiring should be checked for the additional load of hairdryers, and each entryway should have ironing boards, full length mirrors, doors on the shower, and stoppers for the lavatory.”14 A guard was stationed at the gate of Vanderbilt to screen visitors and prevent men entering after visiting hours, although in practice he encouraged the activity he was supposed to prevent by informing the women that they could secretly take their dates through the basement to gain access to any entryway.15

However, lack of practical provisions for women reminded them daily that they were in a space not designed to accommodate them. Women’s bathrooms were “few and far between, often just one, on the top floor.”16 Until the new University Health Center
was opened in 1971, two years after women arrived at Yale, the only time women could see a gynecologist was when one visited for a few hours each week. The mental health service was also inadequately equipped to deal with undergraduate women's problems, particularly the “seemingly epidemic level of eating disorders amongst the women.” The only response was to “padlock the restroom outside the residential college dining hall to thwart the binge-purge behavior.”

The organization of housing, however, was the practical issue that caused the most distress to female students. While the freshman women living in Vanderbilt Hall had the opportunity to form a close-knit community, the female transfer students, who were divided and placed directly into the residential colleges, experienced difficulty forming close bonds with both women and men. Women were placed into a single all-female entryway in each college, a system which prevented them from naturally meeting male students except in the dining hall and common room and made them feel “isolated,” preventing “casual friendships resulting from living near each other.” Male students felt unsure of the acceptability of visiting the female entryway, with one remarking, “I feel as if I’m entering some sanctum santorum.” Additionally, the small number of women in each residential college made it difficult to form groups of close female friends. Millicent Marcus, one of the freshman counselors for the first class of freshman women, remembers “lots of lonely upperclassman women hanging around in the freshman dorm,” desperate for female company.

Problems also arose from the necessity of fitting thirty women into one entryway: In questionnaires distributed to the first female transfer students, one woman in Timothy Dwight College wrote: “Please, please, please reconsider before adding more people to each college. I feel claustrophobic, we all do. We’ve all been in tears about it at some point or other this year.” The housing arrangements managed to make upperclassman women feel both isolated and confined.

The difficulties of finding a community of women on campus were compounded for undergraduate women of color. Out of the 230 women in the Class of 1973, 26 were black; they were joined by just 16 black female transfer students from among the 358 who enrolled. Yale had no female faculty of color, and, given that black students had only begun to be recruited a few years before co-education, some women of color felt isolated “both as black people and as women.” Similarly, Alice Young ’71 felt that as an Asian-American woman, she was treated as “some exotic species.” Many women, however, formed close-knit communities, and “banded together to pursue course subjects and activities that would be responsive to specific needs.” Rosemary Bray ’76 described the black community at Yale as being “like a group of really smart, really raucous cousins I had never met.” Vera Wells ’71, upon finding black women virtually unrepresented in the Yale Bluebook, helped develop the curriculum for a residential college seminar.
titled “The Black Woman,” in which “just about every senior and junior black female was registered.” Sylvia Boone was hired to teach the class, and eventually became the first woman of color to earn tenure at Yale in 1988. The success of the seminar was such that Wells and Boone proposed a conference highlighting black women, for which they secured Chubb Fellowship funding. The 1970 conference, which featured a speaker list boasting both Maya Angelou and Shirley Graham DuBois, was overwhelmingly popular, attracting several hundred attendees, despite the fact that there were fewer than ninety black women in the entire Yale community. Though an overwhelming minority in an institution that was established to exclude them on double grounds, the first undergraduate women of color forged their own path at Yale and worked to ensure that their identities were represented in the learning imparted there.

ATTITUDINAL CHALLENGES

At the conclusion of the third year of coeducation at Yale, the 1971-72 Report on Coeducation found that many members of the Yale community “value the presence of women as adjuncts to men, as they believe that women make Yale a pleasanter place for men.” Indeed, there appears to have been little thought given to the effect that the heavily skewed gender ratio would have on male-female interactions. After the men’s initial curiosity about their new classmates wore off, it became clear that many of them had never had significant experience with women other than their mothers, sisters, and girlfriends. Shortly after the beginning of her first semester, Barbara Wagner ’73 was approached by a male peer in the Jonathan Edwards common room, who informed her that he was unable to concentrate on his reading because the presence of a woman was distracting him. Awkwardness was a lesser evil, however; some men were openly hostile to female students. In the 1970 questionnaires on coeducation issued to freshmen, one male Morse College student wrote: “Coeducation has, so far, been a pain. What have we actually gotten from coeducation? The girls I know are generally plain, obnoxious, over (ostensibly) intelligent, terribly ‘concerned’ and ‘involved,’ and generally just boring.”

Contrary to what one might have expected from an environment in which men so greatly outnumbered women, the dating scene was a major source of frustration for female students. For several years after Yale became coeducational, busloads of “well coiffed and made-up” women from other colleges continued to arrive each weekend for mixers. A September 1969 Yale Daily News article found that 26 percent of freshman women had been on no dates the previous weekend. In exasperation, Yale women hung a banner on Phelps Gate in November 1972, reading, “Happiness is not importable.” The male students at Yale quickly came to view their female classmates largely as friends or sisters, rather than as potential dates. There could, however, be less charitable interpretations of such attitudes; one man reported that he did not want the “hassle of being involved with
some girl at Yale, who [he] might have to see all the time.” Despite appreciating their close friendships with men, female students often felt frustrated by their lack of dating options. One female transfer student, in her end-of-year questionnaire, bluntly wrote: “Friends are fine. I got more guy friends than I know what to do with. But if someone doesn’t start asking me out, I shall be forced to go back to Cambridge.”

One important source of bonding and solidarity for men and women, and an avenue for women to assert their presence on campus, was the active political scene of the time. The early years of coeducation saw widespread student organizing against the Vietnam War and in support of Bobby Seale during the Black Panther trials of 1970, as well as general feminist and leftist activism. Leftist groups, however, were not immune from sexism; J. Berton Fisher ’73 recalled that his friend, Mary, “a political firebrand,” had attended a radical political meeting on campus in the run-up to May Day 1970, only to be asked, as the only woman present, to make the coffee. Many female undergraduates found a more supportive atmosphere within the Yale Women’s Center, which was founded in 1970. It served as the umbrella organization for eighteen different women’s groups, including reproductive rights groups, black women’s groups, and several sororities of color. Much of their early activism was focused on bettering coeducation at Yale; for instance, in 1970, a group of women interrupted a large alumni weekend luncheon in Commons to demand that Yale adopt a sex-blind admissions policy.

**INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES**

It was often difficult for female undergraduates to establish themselves and take leadership positions in long-established extracurricular activities at Yale. In the first year of coeducation, only one woman was offered a place in the Yale Debate Association. While a woman would serve as the President of the Yale Political Union (YPU) in 1978, fairly soon after the advent of coeducation, many sectors of the YPU could hardly be characterized as welcoming to women: In September 1969, the Federalist Party invited a stripper to their first meeting of the semester (and the first after women arrived at Yale), causing the two women present to walk out in disgust. A woman would not serve as Editor-in-Chief of the Yale Daily News until 1981, and would not be elected President of the Yale College Council (YCC) until 1990.

The barriers to women’s participation in sports were even higher. Prior to the first undergraduate women enrolling at Yale, the administration commissioned a report to determine which sports were “safe for girls.” Women in Trumbull College were barred from competing in intercollege soccer matches, due to the risk of “dislocating a girl’s pelvis.” During the first years of coeducation, some facilities in the Payne Whitney Gymnasium remained closed to women, and initially its only accommodations for women were the appointment of a “girls’” athletic director and the introduction of dance, figure skating,
synchronized swimming, and ballet classes. Women’s sports were woefully underfunded and under-resourced: In a particularly egregious example, the women’s soccer team members were forced to pay for their own coach. The women’s tennis team was funded by alumni until 1971, and struggled to be accepted as a club sport, while other sports were supported through “women’s funds.” The Yale Athletic Board (YAB) “frowned upon” female managers; when Nancy Kaplan ’72 became the first female manager of a varsity sport after being named manager of the wrestling team in 1971, the YAB insisted that she be titled “statistician” and watch matches from a balcony to avoid injury – a practice Kaplan quickly abandoned. Shortly thereafter, Congress passed Title IX in March 1972, which denied federal funds – which comprised a full quarter of Yale’s budget – to educational institutions that discriminated against women, including in sports resourcing and funding. Schools were given seven years to comply with the legislation, but Elga Wasserman, Kingman Brewster’s Special Assistant on Coeducation, doubted that Yale’s policies would have met the necessary standards if judged immediately.

Perhaps the staunchest bastion of male resistance to women at Yale was Mory’s. The club announced that female students would not be admitted as members, as they hoped “to keep it a men’s club for as long as is possible.” In protest, women’s groups on campus requested that meetings using University funds not be held at Mory’s, and in February, 1970, Sam Chauncey, the Special Assistant to the President, wrote to Elga Wasserman agreeing that he would no longer schedule the president’s meetings at Mory’s and would circulate a list of alternative dining options among the faculty. Mory’s finally admitted women as members in 1974, after an inventive group of female students petitioned for its liquor license to be revoked. The significance of this decision was tremendous: Mory’s, as a tradition, is so strongly associated with Yale that the denial of membership to women had for years sent a clear message that they did not belong at Yale.

The progressiveness of another Yale tradition, secret societies, varied with regards to coeducation. While several groups did not begin to tap women until the 1990s, many others were quick to include them. In 1969, St. Anthony’s Hall donated $100,000 for the provision of scholarships to women, and gave membership offers to women two years later. In 1971, four of Yale’s landed (and therefore most prestigious) societies – Book and Snake, Manuscript, Berzelius, and Elihu – voted to accept women as members. Nonetheless, many women felt excluded from such campus organizations in the early years of coeducation, and worked to create their own substitutes. Although these were exclusively female and registered with the National Panhellenic Conference, these groups were called “fraternities.”

Just as women were excluded from many Yale organizations, they also felt that the undergraduate curriculum erased women, a challenge that was compounded by the discrimination they often faced in the classroom. There was no doubt that the first
women admitted to Yale were academically exceptional; in the first year of coeducation, women achieved higher grades than men and were awarded more departmental honors. They initially found, however, that the courses on offer were overwhelmingly about, and taught by, men. In a November 1969, questionnaire of freshman women, one wrote: “I’d like a few courses on women. I would also like a shelf of books in the library and the Co-op.” Similarly, Mary Arnstein, Acting Special Assistant to the President on Coeducation, found that so many women approached her to enquire how they could “explore topics pertaining to the past, present, and future of women in our society,” as there were so few appropriate courses, that she created a small library of relevant books, papers, and articles in her office.

Recognizing this deficiency, early female students became advocates for, and were successful in instituting, a Women's Studies Program. Women's Studies courses were initially taught as residential college seminars, but grew in number from one to ten between 1970 and 1972. The first core course of the Women's Studies curriculum, “Feminism and Humanism: An Introduction to Women's Studies,” was taught in 1977 by Catherine McKinnon, at the time one of the most influential feminist scholars in the country.

Initially, however, Yale’s first female undergraduates faced a tremendous shortage of female role models or professors, which in many cases contributed to an unwelcoming classroom atmosphere – something that was acknowledged as a major problem in the Coeducation Report of 1969-70. In 1969, Yale had only 43 women faculty members out of 839 total, accounting for about 5 percent. Only two of these were tenured professors. The scarcity of senior female academics inevitably contributed to an often male-dominated and unwelcoming atmosphere for female students. Leslie Bernal writes that the classroom climate was “chilly, with women students being less likely to be called on to answer provocative questions, more likely to be interrupted, and in other ways be treated as less important than men students.”

The first female undergraduates at Yale entered an institution that had excluded them for almost three hundred years, with the knowledge that they were still deemed unwelcome by many sectors of it. They faced practical, institutional, and attitudinal barriers to their assimilation and success. Yale’s preparation for their arrival did not extend far beyond the installation of occasional women’s bathrooms, and certainly did not address the deep reorientation of values and practices necessary to welcome women; one female transfer student said: “There was, in fact, nothing that Yale had done to prepare itself for the reality of coeducation. It had simply, rather bravely and brazenly, declared its doors open to women.” Nonetheless, Yale’s first female undergraduates displayed tremendous ingenuity and resilience in forging a path for themselves, and acting as pioneers for future generations of Yale women.
NOTES

3. Ibid., 112.
4. Ibid., 10, 113.
8. Miller-Bernal, Going Coed, 120.
9. Ibid., 121.
12. Questionnaire of First Class of Female Transfer Students, March 1970, Box 22, Office on the Education of Women, Yale University, Records (RU 821), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library (hereafter cited as Coeducation Records, Yale).
17. Miller-Bernal, Going Coed, 119.
18. Lisa Neary “Like Father, Like Daughter,” in Reflections on Coeducation, 43-47.
20. Ibid.
24. Miller-Bernal, Going Coed, 120
26. Alice Young, Reflections on Coeducation, 17.
34. Alison Buttenheim, ed., Celebrating Women: Twenty Years of Coeducation at Yale College, 68.
35. Ibid., 16.
37. Miller-Bernal, Going Coed, 121.
38. Fischer J. Berton, in Reflections on Coeducation, 17.
39. Ibid., 132.
41. Butterheim, Celebrating Women, 10.
43. Ibid., 129.
44. Ibid., 33.
48. Ibid., 34.
49. Ibid., 10.
52. Ibid., 129.
53. Ibid., 130.
54. Ibid., 120.
58. Ibid., 120.
59. Ibid., 15.

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TITLE IMAGE

Yale Events and Activities Photographs (RU 690). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

This 1969 photograph is of Amy Soloman, the first woman to register at Yale.