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Women's History in Higher Education in the United States

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Abstract: A look at the people and events that paved the way for women's access to higher education in the United States from the 1790s through 1900.

Keywords: women's education, history

Women's access to higher education in the United States is taken for granted today. This right, however, was a hard won one that belies a struggle that took nearly two centuries to accomplish. In this paper, I briefly trace this history of women's rights. I highlight the work of specific women and men who advocated for them. Such history is vitally important to the field of adult education as much can be gleaned from a look at the adult educators who paved the way for women's education.

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It's important to note that the life patterns of women were altered in many ways by their access to education in general (Solomon (1985). The period between girlhood and marriage was lengthened by the advent of girls' secondary and college education. Early on, young women of means were the only ones to pursue academic study. Women with limited financial means could seek out and obtain employment. Academic educated women could pursue their studies or take jobs as teachers while other women could find work in mills, or other factories. Sometimes young women took jobs in mills or factories to save money for their education. Marriage, for most, was still the ultimate goal. These varied courses of action, however, prolonged the period of youth and the marriage patterns of women changed during this time. Academy women tended to marry later than others and the number of single, never-married is related to the access to education among them.

Reforms in a New Nation

Social reforms for women in education can be traced from the 17th and early 18th centuries when arguments for reform in women's education were first launched in the aftermath of Revolutionary War. Most of this support concerned the need for women's basic education while attempts to secure education for women in high schools or in universities were less audible. Demands for equal educational opportunities for women, in general, were quite revolutionary for the new nation and greatly challenged the status of women's existing place in the domestic sphere (Solomon, 1985).

Some women believed that getting an education would do more to better women's standing in society than the right to vote. Women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Frances Wright and Margaret Fuller were radical pioneers that advocated for women's rights to the same educational opportunities as men. In her short life, Mary Wollstonecraft, a British author of the late 18th

century, was an ardent advocate for women's education and believed that well educated women would make better wives and mothers and contribute positively to society (Dicker, 2008). Her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1791-92), a classic in feminist history, detailed her thoughts and advocacy for women's rights to be educated. Although she maintained the place of women in the home, she also argued that we must define this sphere as a public one that would support the foundation of all social life (<http://womenshistory.about.com/od/wollstonecraft/a/wollstonecraft-rights.htm>).

Frances Wright, born in Scotland in the last decade of the 18th century, believed in universal equality in education, and women's rights including the right to practice birth control. She spoke out against organized religion, slavery and capitalism. After she moved to the United States, she openly advocated for women's education. Wright traveled to the United States for the first time when she was 23 years old in 1818.

Margaret Fuller was also an advocate for women's education and is considered by some to be America's first true feminist. She defied the limitations placed on women's access to higher education to become the first woman to seek and be accepted at Harvard University. Fuller was involved in the Transcendentalist movement in the first half of 19th century and became a journalist, teacher and an activist. She is best known for the initiation of 'conversations', a series of seminars for women that were held in Boston between 1839 and 1844. These were among the first such formats for women's continued adult education. Although she voiced support for suffrage, abolition, and the urban poor, she remained somewhat aloof from the early Women's Movement in the US (LeGates, 2001) and is best known for the enthralling conversation forums she conducted for women (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/poet/fuller.html>).

The Women's Movement and Women's Education

Some of the women who planned and carried out the convention at Seneca Falls in the mid-18th century were recipients of women's education and felt strongly about the value of education for women, its promise for equity and the measure of independence offered to women through education. In that first Declaration of Sentiments read aloud in Seneca Fall in 1848, these women lamented men's domination over women and their denial of the opportunities and facilities for a comprehensive education. They insisted that women be given full access to the same institutions and educational programs available to men (Blount, 1998)

Outspoken women after the Civil War were white and Black. Anna Julia Cooper was an African American educator, born in 1858 into an enslaved household in North Carolina. At the age of 10, Cooper received a scholarship to study at the newly formed St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute in Raleigh, an academy that served a primary through high school curriculum in Raleigh. The school sought to train teachers who might educate former slaves and their families (Giles, 2006). Later, Cooper graduated from Oberlin College, one of the first colleges to accept women and Blacks in an integrated setting. Eventually, Cooper successfully earned a doctoral degree from the University of Paris-Sorbonne. Cooper spoke out on issues of race, womanhood, black disenfranchisement, and white supremacy. She is regarded as a Black female reformer who established schools for Black children in the United States and who also spoke out against lynching and advocated that the women's movement be for all women of all races. She argued that equal opportunity and education would allow women's unique abilities to influence all people positively (Freedman, 2002).*

* *This paper was shortened due to page limitations. For additional information, please contact the author.*