

Executive Summary

The National Coalition of Girls' Schools Alumnae Survey 1999

At the heart of recent controversies about gender equity in education and about single-sex schooling are theories about single-sex versus coed schooling. The National Coalition of Girls' Schools (NCGS)—a member group of 94 girls' schools—operates within the framework of several theories about girls' schools: that they have benefits for girls' academic achievement; that they are affirmative for females in sex-typed subject areas (e.g., science and math); that they are beneficial for female career aspirations; and that they are beneficial for positive sex-role attitudes and self-esteem.

Media attention to these issues, coupled with an interest in updating a 1990 phone survey of alumnae conducted by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman, led NCGS to contract with Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) to conduct a large-scale mail survey of their member schools' alumnae. The survey had three major goals:

1. to gain insight into graduates' perceptions of the effectiveness of their institutions in meeting their goals on behalf of young women;
2. to bring the opinions of young women who have had the single-sex educational experience to the theoretical debate over single-sex versus coeducational schooling; and
3. to explore whether and how certain characteristics of alumnae (e.g., year of graduation, race, financial aid) and schools (e.g., size, region, religious affiliation, day versus boarding) affect alumnae perceptions and attitudes.

The six-page survey gathered information about graduates' girls' school experiences, their post-secondary and employment experiences, and their home lives and related issues. The school sample for the alumnae survey included 64 NCGS member schools in the United States. The alumnae sample included all women graduates of the participating schools from the classes of 1983, 1987, 1991, and 1995. A total of 10,494 alumnae received the survey and 4,274 responded, for an overall response rate of 41%.

The age of respondents ranged from 20 to 36, with an average of 29. The typical respondent was Caucasian, was a day student at her girls' school, and was not a financial aid recipient. She attended a non-Catholic day school, and her school was just as likely to have contact with a boys' school as not. She attended a coed elementary school and a coed college. She was just as likely to be married as not, was not likely to have children, and earned less than \$50,000 a year.

KEY FINDINGS

Alumnae believed their girls' schools were effectively meeting their goals of offering young women a high-quality educational experience, providing them with leadership opportunities, and encouraging their personal growth. Furthermore, they reported distinct advantages of attending a girls' school. Most of them would choose a girls' school again if they had it to do over.

- The majority of alumnae (85%) assigned one of the top two ratings of *very good* or *excellent* to their girls' school overall, and to 14 of 16 specific items about their girls' school. The top-rated components were preparation for college academics and providing academic challenge; nearly all the respondents (91%) rated their schools as *very good* or *excellent* in these areas. With respect to two items, providing networking opportunities and social preparation for college, ratings were more varied. Half of the respondents rated their schools as *very good* or *excellent* in these areas, a quarter said *good*, and the other quarter rated their schools as *fair* or *poor* in these two areas.
- About three-fourths of the alumnae felt that their girls' school experience was an advantage (either *somewhat of an advantage* or *a big advantage*) when deciding to take on leadership roles and when choosing a college.
- Most alumnae said they would repeat the girls' school experience if they had it to do over again (88% either *definitely* or *probably*), and would also encourage their daughter to have the same experience (84%). Even some of the women who had less positive attitudes about girls' schools (for example, disagreeing that they prepare young women for the real world) indicated they would choose a girls' school again.

Half of the alumnae surveyed remain connected in some way to their girls' school.

- About half of the respondents demonstrated a connectedness to their girls' school, by being in contact with faculty or staff (44%), attending reunions (54%), or supporting their school through financial giving (66%). The majority of respondents reported feeling at least *moderately connected* to their school and friends, with about 40% of those feeling either *very* or *extremely*

connected.

Alumnae have very positive attitudes about academics and leadership at girls' schools, while their opinions of the social experience are more qualified.

- Nearly all the respondents (93%) either *somewhat* or *strongly agreed* that girls' schools provide greater leadership opportunities than coed schools. There also was marked agreement that girls' schools are more relevant to young women's academic needs than are coed schools (91% *somewhat* or *strongly agreed*), that young women should be encouraged to attend girls' schools (87%), and that girls' schools provide young women with more encouragement in the areas of science, math, and technology than do coed schools (85%).
- While the majority of alumnae (72%) either *somewhat* or *strongly agreed* that girls' schools are more relevant to young women's personal and social needs than are coed schools, 27% either *somewhat* (21%) or *strongly* (6%) *disagreed* with the statement. Similarly, nearly two-thirds of respondents *agreed* (*somewhat* or *strongly*) that girls' schools prepare young women for the "real world"; however, 27% *somewhat disagreed* with this and 10% *strongly disagreed*.

The majority of NCGS alumnae pursue higher education. Achievement indicators suggest that girls' school alumnae enter college with test scores above the norm. Once in college, they major in science and math at a higher rate than females and males nationwide.

- Nearly all the respondents (94%) had attended or were currently attending college. Of those who had earned a Bachelor's degree, the majority had attended coed colleges (93%). The competitiveness of their colleges varied among most (28%), very (37%), and moderately (33%) difficult schools; only 2% of alumnae college graduates had attended minimally difficult or noncompetitive institutions.
- The most common majors were English, Psychology, Political Science, and History. More than one-third (36%) of the respondents who had earned a Bachelor's degree had graduated with a minor. A minor in the languages was most common, reported by 16% of the college graduates.
- In science and math fields, NCGS alumnae majored at a higher rate than females nationwide (13% NCGS, compared to 2% females nationwide). The NCGS rate is also higher than that of males nationwide (10%).
- The average SAT Math and Verbal scores of NCGS alumnae were both 588. Across cohorts,

NCGS alumnae consistently outscored females and males nationwide on both sections of the SAT. Respondents' average college G.P.A. was 3.3.

- At the time of the survey, 60% of the respondents who had graduated from college were employed. The majority (83%) of them were employed full-time. The most common fields of employment included Business, Education, Arts and Entertainment, Law, and Sales.

NCGS alumnae believe they were better prepared for most aspects of college than women who attended coed high schools.

- Girls' school alumnae felt their biggest advantage relative to female college classmates who had attended coed high schools was their overall academic preparation; the majority of respondents (85%) perceived themselves as better prepared (either *slightly*, *somewhat*, or *much more prepared*) than other women.
- Respondents also were positive about their preparation for the college classroom—in terms of class participation and academic engagement with faculty—and their preparation in the areas of self-confidence and leadership. In each of these areas, more than 80% of girls' school alumnae felt their preparation to be superior to that of other women.
- Regarding specific academic disciplines, three-quarters of respondents indicated they were more prepared for humanities in college than their coed school counterparts. Almost two-thirds each said they were more prepared for college science (62%) and mathematics (62%).
- Respondents' ratings were less positive regarding preparation for interactions—both academic and social—with men. Thirty-seven per cent of girls' school respondents felt more prepared than coed school graduates—but an equal number felt less prepared (either *slightly*, *somewhat*, or *much less prepared*)— for academic interactions with men. The remaining quarter indicated that they were *equally prepared*. Girls' school alumnae felt least prepared for social interactions with men; 52% of alumnae perceived themselves to be less prepared in this regard than their coed school counterparts; 30% felt equally prepared, and about one-fifth thought they were more prepared for such interactions.

NCGS alumnae are active members and leaders within their communities.

- The majority of alumnae (86%) had volunteered in some sort of community organization since graduating from high school, compared to 39% of adults nationwide who participate in an ongoing community service activity.

- In addition to being actively involved in their communities, 80% of respondents had held leadership positions since graduating from high school. Leadership positions in the workplace and in college were especially common.

Some characteristics of alumnae and of girls' schools appear to mediate the girls' school experience.

- The results indicate that alumnae from the later graduating classes were more positive than alumnae from the earlier two cohorts. In the absence of longitudinal data, it is impossible to conclude whether this difference reflects a difference between girls' schools in the 1980s and 1990s, or a change in the perceptions alumnae have about their girls' schools over time.
- Alumnae who received financial aid were more positive than those who did not.
- Caucasian respondents were more positive than minority respondents, and they appeared to have greater connectedness to their schools than did minorities. Similarly, schools with more Caucasian students engendered more connection.
- Alumnae of Catholic girls' schools and schools with coordinate boys' schools were less positive about their schools and about their preparation for college than were alumnae from non-Catholic schools and schools without official relationships with boys' schools.
- In general, school characteristics were less associated with the major outcomes studied than were alumnae characteristics. This suggests that outcomes associated with girls' schools may have more to do with the girls themselves than with which schools they attend.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the typical NCGS alumna thinks about her girls' school in positive terms, and feels the experience has been an advantage to her in making important life decisions. Since graduating from her girls' school, she has both volunteered in a community organization and held a leadership position. She is a college graduate (of a first or second tier institution), and her SAT scores were higher than women and men nationwide. While she felt more prepared than other women for many aspects of college, she felt less prepared for interactions with men.

She is more likely than not to have maintained some sort of demonstrable connection to her school. She has generally positive attitudes about single-sex schooling, believing that girls' schools provide young women with an experience superior to what they would encounter at a coed school. If she had it to do over again, she would attend a girls' school and would encourage a daughter to attend as well.