

The Girls' School Experience

A Survey of Young Alumnae of Single-Sex Schools



Executive Summary

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THE NATIONAL COALITION OF GIRLS' SCHOOLS

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Statement from the Executive Directors

In the nearly 15 years since the National Coalition of Girls' Schools was founded in 1991, single-sex education has experienced what can only be described as a renaissance. There are more than 500 private girls' schools in the United States today – with more opening their doors every year – along with nearly two dozen girls' public and charter schools, and growing numbers of single-sex classrooms in public school districts nationwide.

The message is clear: In the case of girls' schools, single-sex education works. Students and families seek it out. It is a crucial feature of the educational landscape today. Research bears this sentiment out, but perhaps the most convincing arbiter of the efficacy of single-sex education for girls is the girls' school graduate herself. What does she make of her experience? How does she rate her education, in and of itself and in comparison to her peers?

These are crucial questions to inform not only students and families as they explore educational options, but policy-makers as well. For this reason, NCGS contracted with Goodman Research Group, Inc., to explore the attitudes and opinions of girls' school alumnae, average age 19 years old, graduates of the Class of 2004. We asked Goodman to conduct a scientific survey of alumnae to quantify their school experience as well as the transition to college, academic interests and career aspirations.

More than 1,000 alumnae participated, sharing their views in a series of 32 questions asking them to rate their satisfaction in key areas such as academic rigor, opportunities for personal growth, the development of leadership skills and preparedness for life beyond high school. Their responses indicate high levels of what, in the parlance of the business world, might be termed 'customer satisfaction.' By wide margins, they consider themselves well-positioned to excel in college and the careers that will follow.

While no one creditably argues that "one size fits all" when it comes to learning, this study represents a powerful argument in favor of the effectiveness of single-sex education for girls. It is an environment where girls put academics first, where girls enjoy not just equal opportunity but every opportunity. At girls' schools, girls dare to take on new challenges, to stretch themselves both academically and personally, where their learning styles as well as their developmental benchmarks take center stage.

NCGS member schools are educational leaders, not followers of trends, and have led the way for generations. They are incubators of innovation, where best practices for the teaching of girls draw upon decades of tradition while embracing the challenges and seizing the opportunities of the 21st century. Girls' schools know that students who are held to the highest expectations, given access to necessary resources, and who are led to understand that serious schooling is theirs for the taking -- these are students who do not turn back. This is exactly the culture of a girls' school, and time spent within one transforms girls. It is a sound investment for life.

Meg Milne Moulton & Whitney Ransome
Executive Directors
The National Coalition of Girls' Schools

Major Findings

The purposes of this study were to examine the perceived outcomes associated with girls' school attendance, with a focus on examining alumnae perceptions of the effectiveness of their schools in preparing them for the academic and social aspects of college. Drawing on the responses of more than 1,000 alumnae representing 61 schools, the study found that:

- Alumnae were very satisfied with their academic experiences at their girls' schools, and the vast majority would recommend others to attend their schools
- Alumnae clearly felt that their schools contributed to their self-confidence, and provided them with an environment that supported their development as individuals
- Alumnae gave their schools high marks for providing opportunities to develop leadership skills
- Alumnae felt they were more prepared for the academic transition to college than their peers who attended coed high schools
- Alumnae felt well-prepared for academic interactions with men
- Alumnae planned to major in crucial fields such as business/economics or mathematics and the sciences in significant numbers

The Girls' School Experience

In the survey, alumnae were asked a series of questions about their girls' school experience, using a 5-point scale where 5 represents the highest level of satisfaction. Nearly all respondents were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with their schools' ability to provide them with:

- Rigorous academic curriculums (95%)
- Individualized attention (93%)
- Encouragement to develop their own interests (80%)

More than 90% of the alumnae said they would *definitely* or *probably* attend a girls' school again if given the opportunity (61% and 31%, respectively), and 64% agreed that young women should be encouraged to attend girls' schools. Further:

Table 1
Satisfaction with the schools' academics:

How satisfied were you with your schools in the following ways:	Not at all satisfied (1)	A little satisfied (2)	Moderately satisfied (3)	Very satisfied (4)	Extremely satisfied (5)	Average rating
Providing a rigorous academic curriculum	<1%	1%	4%	24%	71%	4.6
Providing individualized attention	<1%	1%	5%	22%	71%	4.6
Encouraging students to develop their own interests	2%	3%	15%	35%	45%	4.2

One of the goals of the NCGS member schools is to provide students with opportunities for individual growth, along with a supportive environment to nurture girls' development. Respondents indicated that schools were doing a very good job of this:

- 85% of respondents were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with their schools' encouragement for students' to pursue new challenges
- 82% of responding alumnae were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with their schools' fostering of self-confidence
- 75% were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with their schools' encouraging an appreciation of individual difference

Respondents also rated their satisfaction with their girls’ school in the areas of fostering community, encouraging community service, and developing girls’ leadership. As shown in Table 2, alumnae were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with their schools’ support and encouragement in all three areas.

- 87% of alumnae were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with how well their school fostered students’ sense of belonging to a community
- 84% were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with their schools’ provision of leadership opportunities
- 71% of alumnae were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with the amount of encouragement schools showed for students’ involvement with community service

Table 2
Satisfaction with community, leadership and community service

How satisfied were you with your schools’:	Not at all satisfied (1)	A little satisfied (2)	Moderately satisfied (3)	Very satisfied (4)	Extremely satisfied (5)	Average rating
Fostering your sense of belonging to a community	1%	2%	10%	30%	57%	4.4
Providing you with leadership opportunities	1%	3%	12%	29%	55%	4.4
Encouraging you to become involved with community service	2%	8%	19%	34%	37%	4.0

N = 1,018

Alumnae were presented with several statements citing the possible benefits of a girls’ only education, and they were asked to consider how well their girls’ schools prepared them for college in comparison to their observation of female college peers who attended coed high schools.

- 85% agreed that girls’ school provide a greater “can do” attitude
- 84% agreed that girls’ schools provide more leadership opportunities
- 83% agreed that girls’ schools provide a better environment for personal development
- 74% agreed that girls’ schools provide more encouragement in math, science and technology

The Transition to College

Alumnae were asked how they felt their schools prepared them for the academic and social transition to college, compared to their peers from coed schools. Respondents rated how satisfied they were with their preparation on a 1-5 scale, with 1 equal to *not at all satisfied*, 2 equal to *a little satisfied*, 3 equal to *moderately satisfied*, 4 equal to *very satisfied*, and 5 equal to *extremely satisfied*.

As indicated in Table 3, 93% of alumnae were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with the preparation they received for the academic aspects of college, 76% were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with the preparation they received for the extracurricular aspects of college, and 55% were *very* or *extremely* satisfied with the preparation they received for the informal social aspects of college.

Table 3
Satisfaction with preparation for transitions

How satisfied were you with preparation for:	Not at all satisfied (1)	A little satisfied (2)	Moderately satisfied (3)	Very satisfied (4)	Extremely satisfied (5)	Average rating
Academic aspects of college	<1%	1%	6%	25%	68%	4.6
Extracurricular aspects of college	1%	3%	20%	35%	41%	4.1
Informal social aspects of college	4%	11%	30%	33%	22%	3.6

N = 1,013

When asked to compare themselves to their co-ed school peers in terms of specific academic skills:

- 84% of respondents felt *more* prepared for college writing and 15% felt *equally* prepared.
- 69% of respondents felt *more* prepared for public speaking and 28% felt *equally* prepared
- 50% of respondents felt *more* prepared for college science and 43% felt *equally* prepared
- 50% of respondents felt *more* prepared with computer skills and 42% felt *equally* prepared
- 51% of respondents felt *more* prepared for college math and 39% felt *equally* prepared

Table 4
Prepared for college academics

Compared to peers who attended coed schools:	Much less prepared	Somewhat less prepared	Equally prepared	Somewhat more prepared	Much more prepared
Writing skills	<1%	1%	15%	30%	54%
Public speaking	<1%	3%	28%	34%	35%
Science skills	<1%	7%	43%	30%	20%
Computer skills	<1%	8%	42%	28%	22%
Math skills	1%	9%	39%	28%	23%

N = 1,013

With regard to the dynamics and interactions taking place within the college classroom, alumnae believed their preparation was comparable or superior to that of their coed high school peers in several ways:

- 78% of respondents felt *more* prepared to interact with faculty and 21% felt *equally* prepared
- 80% of respondents felt *more* prepared to participate in class discussions and 17% felt *equally* prepared
- 60% of respondents felt *more* prepared to take on leadership roles in college and 36% felt *equally* prepared

Table 5
Prepared for the college classroom environment

Compared to peers who attended coed schools:	Much less prepared	Somewhat less prepared	Equally prepared	Somewhat more prepared	Much more prepared
Interactions with faculty	<1%	1%	21%	32%	46%
Participation in class discussions	<1%	3%	17%	27%	53%
Taking on leadership roles in college	<1%	4%	36%	32%	28%

N = 1,013

Compared to other dimension of preparedness, alumnae felt at least as well-prepared as their coed peers to respond to gender bias in the classrooms and for academic interactions with men.

- 51% of respondents felt *somewhat more* or *much more* prepared for gender bias in the classroom and 33% felt *equally* prepared, for an overall figure of 84%
- 29% felt *somewhat more* or *much more* prepared than their coed high school peers for academic interactions with men and 39% felt *equally* prepared, for an overall figure of 68%

Table 6 shows the distribution of responses:

Table 6
Prepared for the coed classroom

Compared to peers who attended coed schools:	Much less prepared	Somewhat less prepared	Equally prepared	Somewhat more prepared	Much more prepared
Gender bias in the classrooms	2%	13%	33%	23%	28%
Academic interactions with men	8%	24%	39%	16%	13%

N = 1,013

Academic Interests and Career Aspirations

Nearly all of the alumnae expected to have careers and professions, and the majority felt it was important to hold positions of leadership and to contribute to their communities. Ninety-five percent (95%) of the respondents said that having a career and profession were *very* or *extremely* important to them, and 73% said that it was *very* or *extremely* important that they be recognized for their career success, community service, and volunteerism. The vast majority of alumnae view a career or profession as an integral part of their lives.

At the time of the survey, 99% of the respondents were completing their first year of a four-year college. Although many first-year college students had not yet declared a major, alumnae were asked what major they thought they might select. Eighty-five percent of alumnae (856 of 1,018) indicated a possible major. The top five intended majors, as shown in the table below were:

- History, Geography or Politics
- Psychology, Sociology or Anthropology
- Math or Science

- Economics or Business
- Arts or Music
- English, Literature or Writing

Table 7
Intended majors

	% of responses
History, Geography or Politics	22%
Psychology, Sociology, or Anthropology	17%
Math or Science	15%
Economics or Business	12%
Arts or Music	7%
English, Literature or Writing	7%
Engineering	4%
Education	3%
Health Science	3%
Architecture	2%
Foreign Languages	2%
Athletics, Computer Technology, or an 'undefined' major	Approximately 2% each

N = 856

The most significant career influences for alumnae were their families, teachers, and advisors. Alumnae were asked to describe who or what had been the greatest influence on their career aspirations. Thirty-eight percent (38%) indicated a family member, 20% specified that a teacher or advisor had influenced them, and 17% attributed their career aspirations to a specific life experience, such as an internship. An additional 10% of alumnae said that they were their own most significant influence and 8% cited specific non-familial people. Four percent said they either didn't know or that there had been no influences thus far.

Report Methodology

This is the second study Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) has conducted for The National Coalition of Girls' Schools. In 1999, GRG surveyed NCGS alumnae from four academic cohorts who graduated from high school between 1983 and 1995. Results of that study are available online at www.ncgs.org.

Six years after the original study, NCGS contracted with GRG to survey alumnae who graduated from an NCGS member school in 2004, with a focus on the role that the girls' schools played in women's transitions to college. The primary goals of the survey were to examine:

- Alumnae's perceived outcomes associated with girls' school attendance
- Alumnae's perceptions of the effectiveness of their schools in preparing them for the academic and social transition to college

Survey respondents completed an online survey consisting of 32 possible questions covering three areas of interest: (1) the girls' school experience, (2) alumnae's academic interests and career aspirations, and (3) the influence of NCGS member school attendance on academic and social transitions to college. Respondents indicated their satisfaction by assigning ratings to each area and using a 1-5 scale, with 1 equal to *not at all satisfied*, 2 equal to *a little satisfied*, 3 equal to *moderately satisfied*, 4 equal to *very satisfied*, and 5 equal to *extremely satisfied*.

All NCGS member private schools in the United States having a program serving grades nine through twelve were invited to participate in the study. Eighty-three schools were eligible to participate, and 61 schools ultimately participated. The school participation rate was 73%.

Contact information (either alumnae email address or parent's permanent mailing address) was available for 2,606 alumnae. Of the 2,606 possible respondents, GRG received completed surveys from 1,018 alumnae. The alumnae response rate was 39%.

About NCGS

The National Coalition of Girls' Schools is a leading proponent of single-sex education for girls. Since its founding in 1991, NCGS has grown to include 105 girls' independent and public, day and boarding schools across the United States, with affiliate partners in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Currently, some 45,000 students attend NCGS schools in the U.S. alone.

Our members share a commitment to the values and benefits of girls' schools and a belief that all girls, regardless of educational setting, deserve the opportunity to realize their potential, to be active and equal, confident and competent leaders, participants and contributors. The Coalition's major areas of focus include academic achievement, financial literacy; math, science and technology; sports, wellness and physical fitness; leadership; global citizenship and community involvement.

Online: www.ncgs.org

About Goodman Research Group, Inc.

Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) is a research company that specializes in evaluating programs, materials, and services. GRG has a wide range of clients: broadcast media (from television networks to production companies); formal education institutions; independent organizations; foundations; research and development companies; and government agencies. GRG expertise extends to all areas of evaluation research, including feasibility studies and needs assessments, formative research, process evaluation, outcome evaluation, and summative evaluation, as well as related services such as consultation and workshops.

Online: www.grginc.com