

**COLLEGE  
WISE**



# **Guide to Women's Colleges**

**Collegewise 2021 Edition • By Casey Near**

# Notes on this edition

When we last updated this guide – back in ye olden days of February 2016 – the stories about women’s colleges had a flavor of panic tinged with nostalgia. In 2013, Sweet Briar College had announced it would be closing its doors at the end of that academic year. While the story ended on a hopeful note (alumnae rallied to keep the college open), a series of op-eds followed, hinging on the central question: were women’s colleges still relevant?

Interestingly, from 2016 through 2019, many women’s colleges then saw a [surge in applicants](#). Admissions directors, college counselors, and journalists have tried to [put a finger](#) on what prompted the surge – a change in political climate, the rise of the #MeToo movement, or evolving attitudes toward feminism and gender-inclusive spaces and communities (I’d like to think it was 100% due to this guide, but that perhaps only accounted for 95% of the surge).

In all likelihood, it was a perfect storm of moments that led to this: a moment when women’s colleges were not merely relevant – they were popular. But internally, women’s colleges continued to grapple with questions of identity. Specifically, who were women’s colleges for?

At the time of this update, we’re also in the midst of yet another rollercoaster for higher education: the COVID-19 pandemic. And while the pandemic is (sigh, yes, this word) unprecedented, the recession we’ve entered into is not. As we’ve seen in previous [recessions](#), economic uncertainty disproportionately impacts small, regional 4-year colleges who serve mostly local populations. And aside from the handful of highly selective women’s colleges, most women’s colleges today are regional institutions.

While all colleges are struggling with tuition shortfalls, what they choose to do in the face of such a crisis will vary, as it always has. In the face of the pandemic, Converse College in South Carolina [expanded](#) to become a fully co-ed institution, while maintaining a Converse College for Women within their institution, so they could open their doors to more local students (similar to the structures of Mary Baldwin and Brenau Colleges for Women). It’s possible many women’s colleges in this guide will change their admissions policies or the make-up of their campuses to stay afloat. When we first wrote this guide in 2013, there were 47 women’s colleges in the US. Today, 37 have remained open and function as women’s colleges.

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# Notes on this edition

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The current iteration of this guide reflects not so much an update as an overhaul. The changes reflected here aren't just due to societal changes in the landscape of higher education (most notably the changing policies around trans and non-binary students at women's colleges). The changes also reflect the realities I didn't know or notice eight years ago – how I'd erased the history of co-ed colleges who admitted Black women before the first women's colleges did, and how women's colleges weren't historically as inclusive as they are perceived to be. The latest version of this guide works to address those shifts and better reveal those truths.

As this guide illuminates, women's colleges are united by a few core elements: they tend to be small liberal arts colleges, and they historically serve students who are women. But, that latter element – serving students who identify as women – has been in flux recently. As conversations around gender have evolved on the national stage, it's put a spotlight on institutions historically defined by gender. Put simply: how will women's colleges continue to define themselves?

Given that so much has changed in the last few years around gender-based admissions policies, I've updated this guide to speak to those changes broadly. Frankly, all earlier versions of this guide were woefully lacking in a more nuanced understanding of gender. How colleges have evolved in recent years, especially around gender and sex, speaks to both their respective histories and their futures. It's up to our students to decide how they might fit into that evolution.

My continued hope is that this guide can help students navigate the evolving landscape of women's colleges, to understand if one is right for them, and – if they choose to apply – to do so with clarity and purpose.

**Casey**

*February 2021*

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# How to use this guide

## Is this for me?

This guide is primarily for cis and trans feminine, non-binary, and trans masculine high school students interested in pursuing higher education. It's also for educators and counselors trying to get a better understanding of modern-day women's colleges. Frankly, it's for anyone curious about higher education.

In my work with students both in admissions and counseling, I've found that very few high school-aged students consider women's colleges, so we share this guide for all students thoughtfully analyzing their college options. If you're a high school student reading this guide, the goal is to provide another viewpoint on your college search, one you may not have previously thought about. Even if you don't end up applying to one, I hope this guide enables you to better assess if a women's college might be a fit for you.

## A note on language

In the last few years, many women's colleges have adopted policies to become more gender inclusive. Many of those students at more trans-inclusive women's colleges prefer the term "historically women's colleges" to define their school, as they are no longer defined merely by admitting cis women. At others, their policies are stricter, and "women's college" is the more apt descriptor, as they only admit students born and identifying as women. Because I'll be discussing women's colleges broadly in this guide, we'll be using the term "women's college" here. That said, I recognize there are many variations among women's colleges, as there have always been, and that gender identity within admissions policies is a newer element of that. So, if you're curious about the evolving trans admissions policies at women's colleges, you can read more on [page 14](#). And, for anyone who wants to learn more about the terms regarding gender and identity in this guide, I'd recommend UC Davis' comprehensive [glossary](#).

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# How to use this guide

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Lastly, I'll be calling these institutions gender exclusive, rather than single gender or single sex. "Single" doesn't quite capture the many gender identities on women's college campuses, but at the time of publication, the one unifying factor of most women's colleges is they do not admit cis men, which best aligns itself to the term "gender exclusive." Any references to "co-ed" programs or schools (like master's programs, or larger universities that have women's colleges within them) mean those programs admit all gender identities, including cis men.

## Where this information came from

Casey Near (now briefly referring to herself in the third person) attended Scripps College and was an admissions officer at Mills College. Since 2013, she has worked at Collegewise as a counselor, currently serving as the Executive Director of Counseling.

The information I share here (back to first person!) is based partially on my own experience as an admissions officer at a women's college, a student and alumna of one, and a counselor who talks with high school students about a range of colleges. This latest edition is also based on research around the changes in women's college admissions policies and campus climates; there's a small but mighty group of incredible researchers who study higher education and women's colleges, all of whom are thanked and referenced at the very end of this guide (and to whom this guide is very much indebted).

This is by no means an exhaustive guide to all women's colleges, but the goal is that this handbook is an easy-to-read start for any student or counselor looking for more information about present-day women's colleges.

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# How to use this guide

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The previous editions were also co-written by Sara Kratzok, a graduate of Wellesley College and former volunteer admissions interviewer and application reader. Casey and Sara wrote the first two editions of this guide together during their overlapping tenures at Collegewise.

## What's ahead

This guide covers a lot of ground, and you may already know exactly what info you need. If that's the case, feel free to jump right in. Here's what's ahead:

- [Current list of women's colleges](#)
- [So, what is a women's college?](#)
- [Researching women's colleges](#)
- [How do I differentiate women's colleges?](#)
- [Admissions policies](#)
- [Social activism](#)
- [Majors](#)
- [Common qualities of strong women's college applicants](#)
- [\(Real\) life at a women's college](#)
- [Life after a women's college](#)

# Current list of women's colleges

As of February 2021, here's a current list of the women's colleges in the United States, 37 in total. There are women's colleges in 16 states, as well as one in D.C., and they range from arts institutions (Moore) to historically Black women's colleges (Spelman and Bennett) to women's colleges housed within larger co-ed universities (Converse, Douglass, Mary Baldwin, St. Catherine's, Stern, and Brenau Women's College).

[Agnes Scott College](#) (GA)

[Alverno College](#) (WI)

[Barnard College](#) (NY)

[Bay Path University](#) (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 Mary](#) (NE)

[Converse College for Women](#) (SC)

[Cottey College](#) (MO)

[Douglass Residential College](#) (NJ)

[Hollins University](#) (VA)

[Judson College](#) (AL)

[Mary Baldwin College for Women](#) (VA)

[Meredith College](#) (NC)

[Mills College](#) (CA)

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

[Mount Holyoke College](#) (MA)

[Mount Mary University](#) (WI)

[Mount Saint Mary's University](#) (CA)

[Notre Dame of Maryland University, Women's College](#) (MD)

[St. Catherine University, College for Women](#) (MN)

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

[Salem College](#) (NC)

[Scripps College](#) (CA)

[Simmons University](#) (MA)

[Smith College](#) (MA)

[Spelman College](#) (GA)

[Stephens College](#) (MO)

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

[Sweet Briar College](#) (VA)

[Trinity Washington University](#) (DC)

[Wellesley College](#) (MA)

[Wesleyan College](#) (GA)

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

Here's the honest truth: in 2021, women's colleges don't have as much in common with each other as they used to. So, writing a guide that attempts to unify them is, well, tricky. They share a moniker, but even that moniker is up for dispute. Not everyone who attends a women's college is a woman. Some colleges are addressing gender openly in their admissions policies; some are actively anti-trans students in their admissions policies. Some campuses have a more conservative bent; others are hot beds of social justice activism. Some are standalone women's colleges; others live within broader co-ed institutions. They contain multitudes.

That said, there are a few things that still unite women's colleges to this day. I'll address those below as a starting point because their shared histories – being places for women to pursue higher education – do dictate a lot of their present-day realities. But liking one women's college doesn't mean you're going to like all of them. Just because you like University of Michigan doesn't mean you'll like all the other schools in the Big 10 (...and I'm pretty sure you're not allowed to like both Michigan and Ohio State anyway).

So, what unifies them? Well, 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 fewer than 1,000 students, some have 1,000-3,000)
- Small class sizes, with the occasional large lecture course

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

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- Lots of personalized attention from professors and campus administrators
- A range of academic majors, from physics to medieval studies and pretty much everything else in between
- A focus on sharpening your reading, writing, and critical thinking skills

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

In addition to the core elements of a liberal arts college, women's colleges share a few differentiating factors from your standard SLAC. Though many women's colleges first admitted only white women, they've evolved since the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be far more inclusive. Now, women's colleges tend to be more diverse than their liberal arts college counterparts, especially for students of color and non-traditional aged students. Women's colleges have nearly three times as many students ages 25-65 as co-ed liberal arts colleges (16.6% compared to 6% of the student population), they enroll a higher percentage of students of color (43% compared to 30%), and they educate a higher percentage of low-income students (43% compared to 32%), source [here](#).

But, women's colleges are not one-size-fits-all. In addition to their identities as SLACs, women's colleges also have created their own unique identities around a variety of factors, including:

- Gender identity: each has its own policies around who is admitted (and supported) on campus ([more on page 14](#))
- Demographics: as noted above, women's colleges are quite diverse relative to their co-ed counterparts, but each varies in their student breakdown. There are also a number of women's colleges housed within co-ed universities, so the demographics of the surrounding institution are also important to understand

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

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- Geography: there are women's colleges located throughout the country (see [page 8](#)), but they also vary in terms of where their students hail from
- Politics and social justice: women's colleges have long been defined by their activism, but what each campus community engages in (and to what extent) will vary ([more on page 15](#))
- Academic programs: they each have their own most popular majors and specialized offerings (more [on page 16](#))
- Cross-registration options and even dual-degree programs at other (often co-ed) campuses
- Master's programs: some have them, some don't, but post-graduate programs at women's colleges are generally co-ed
- History: each campus has its own story and how they tell and celebrate their histories varies
- Religious affiliation: some women's colleges used to be religiously affiliated, and some still are (as some examples, [Stern College](#) of Yeshiva University is Jewish-affiliated; [Judson College](#) in Alabama is a Christian college; and [Alverno College](#) is a Catholic, Franciscan college)
- Traditions: from high teas to class tree days, women's colleges often have an appreciation for the legacy of women who have come before them

Further in this guide, you'll read more about some of the biggest differentiators between women's colleges today: admissions policies, politics and social justice, and academic programs. But as with all college research, I recommend first asking good questions – both of yourself and of these schools – to determine which ones are a good fit for you. That's where I'll head next.

# Researching women's colleges

Great college research starts with understanding your own priorities. What matters to you? What makes you tick? What do you want out of college? Those are big questions that may seem unrelated to researching women's colleges, but effective college research needs to begin with a sense of what it is you're looking for. So, before I dive into what differentiates women's colleges (and questions to ask of them), I wanted to share a few questions to ask yourself.

And, I promise: this isn't just a meaningless exercise. Colleges will often ask you "why are you applying here?" in their supplemental essay questions. The best answers to those have a strong sense of self – what you've learned about your needs, your hopes, and what makes you come alive. Whether you're just starting your search or beginning to narrow your list, here are a few questions to keep in mind to get you closer to that answer:

- 1. What environments have allowed me to be at my best?** Maybe it's your basketball team, church group, computer science class, or summer job. What made those environments good for you? Look for clues in your past to help map out what environments will be best for your future.
- 2. What qualities do my friends have in common?** This is the surest way to get a sense of what your college community should look like. As you read descriptions of colleges and listen to current students talk about the community, does it sound like people you'd want to hang out with?
- 3. What inspires me to be my best self?** Maybe it's when you're putting the finishing touches on an op-ed for the newspaper, attending a local protest, or delivering a pep talk for your cross-country team. College is, hopefully, a time of great transformation and growth. Thinking about when and where you were most motivated will help you get a sense of what to replicate (or not) in your future environment.

Once you have some answers to those questions, it's time to start asking some questions of the colleges. When researching women's colleges, it helps to start by reading the history and mission of women's colleges (I promise, it's not as boring as it sounds).

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# Researching women's colleges

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To be honest, that's not often where I'd recommend starting with a lot of college research, but legacy and history are particularly important to understand at women's colleges. How has that legacy evolved? Does the discussion of traditions or their mission inspire you in some way?

As some examples, Scripps College has a [mission](#) "to develop in its students the ability to think clearly and independently, and the ability to live confidently, courageously, and hopefully." [Mills College](#) "believes in the power of diversity to enrich our learning and our lives" and they are "committed to leading the charge to create an inclusive and just society." The sense of purpose and legacy are integral parts of the experience at a women's colleges. If you feel a thrill of inspiration reading a women's college's mission, that's a sign you might be a good fit.

Next, see if you can find profiles of students who attend and what they have to say about their experiences. What words are they using to describe themselves and each other? Does that sound like your friends, or the people you gravitate toward? Colleges increasingly have virtual student panels, or live events on Instagram or Facebook, hosted by their admissions offices. If you're able to attend a live event, virtual or in person, here are a few questions that are helpful to ask current students or admissions counselors:

1. **What most surprised you about attending a women's college?**
2. **Of the people who thrive here, what quality or qualities do they seem to have in common?**
3. **What were the last most popular events on campus?**
4. **What's one thing you've learned to live with because you love everything else enough?**

Getting a better sense of the day-to-day of student life, and the feel of the community, is a big part of researching women's colleges. That smaller community feel is in large part what defines a women's college. But the flavor of that community – what makes it unique – varies campus to campus. Just because these colleges are defined by a shared history or admissions policy doesn't mean they're all the same. In the next section, I'll speak to some bigger clues you can use to start to differentiate women's colleges.

# So, how do I differentiate women's colleges?

For as much as women's colleges have in common, I also recognize that this is an increasingly wide-ranging group of institutions. Thankfully, there are some easy ways to start to differentiate them. And, I'm not just sharing this for kicks: the better you know a school and what makes it unique (especially amongst its women's college peers), the better your eventual application will be. Knowing precisely why you're applying, and being able to communicate that to the college, is a huge indicator of success in this process. So, here are three of my favorite ways to get a sense of the differences between campuses and their communities.

## Admissions Policies

This is one of the bigger differentiators of women's colleges today. For students who are trans, genderqueer, or non-binary – and anyone for whom these policies would be important – it's imperative to study this closely.

While it's hard to unify this group of colleges around policy, women's colleges seem to be moving toward admitting any student who identifies as a woman. As [Barnard](#) and [Wellesley](#) both state in their updated policies, they are institutions for students who "consistently live and identify as women." At the time of publication, there are 19 women's colleges who admit trans women in addition to cis women. There are some notable exceptions to this, largely on the more progressive end of the spectrum. Agnes Scott, Mills, and Mt. Holyoke, for example, are some of the most inclusive women's colleges, admitting trans men, trans women, and non-binary students.

But, as you'll see when you dig into these policies, there's a difference between a college's admissions policies (who they will admit to campus) and a college's graduation requirements (who they will allow to receive a diploma). So, it's important to note that 16 women's colleges have established policies that are also inclusive to students who become trans men once on campus.

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# So, how do I differentiate women's colleges?

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Those colleges are Agnes Scott, Alverno, Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Cedar Crest, College of Saint Benedict, Hollins, Mills, Mount Holyoke, Mount Mary University, St. Catherine, Scripps, Simmons, Smith, Spelman, and Wellesley. On the flip side, there are 4 colleges who will actively prevent a student from graduating if they transition to male while in college, and those are Bennett, Converse College for Women, Stephens, and Wesleyan College.

Given how much this varies campus to campus, make sure to check with individual college policies to confirm your eligibility. You can see a thorough breakdown of all women's college trans and non-binary policies [here](#), and a compilation of the phrasing of these policies at the Campus Pride website [here](#).

No matter how you identify, if inclusivity is important to you in your college environment, it's important to know these policies in advance. What a college has decided – or hasn't yet discussed – reflects a college's administrative stance. It's up to you to decide if that stance aligns with your needs and priorities.

## Social Activism

Colleges have long been politically active places, and women's colleges are prime among them. But how they continue to be active – and how much – varies campus to campus.

It's also important to note that just because women's colleges were founded on the principle of expanding educational access doesn't mean they were historically inclusive spaces. Many women's colleges [only admitted white women](#), and there were quite a few co-ed colleges who admitted Black women before the first women's colleges did (Oberlin and Hillsdale [were the first two](#)). Spelman College and Bennett College, the two historically Black women's colleges, were founded to expand higher education access to Black women in particular. it's the place for you.

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# So, how do I differentiate women's colleges?

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Women's colleges' histories vary. And just like with admissions policies, how they have adapted in the time since their founding says a lot about their present philosophies and communities. If you're able to schedule a visit to a women's college campus, check out the flyers in lounges and the dining halls. Are there protests planned or upcoming political discussions? Take a look at recent speakers on campus or virtually. Who have they invited? Are there LGBTQIA+ stickers on professors' doors? If you're researching from a distance, what do their student newspapers talk about online? If you ask current students what the most recent, popular events were on campus, what do they say? All of this will give you a better sense of what conversations are or aren't happening on campus, and if

## Majors

Within women's colleges, you'll find the standard range of major offerings at any liberal arts colleges: from English to economics to physics. But there are some schools that offer variations on traditional offerings, and those variations can tell you a lot about their academic approach – and if it's a good fit for you.

Think about your own academic interests and what you might want to pursue or have available to you in college. Then, start looking at the major offerings on the website. Is this a school that offers nursing or more pre-professional programs like social work or engineering (not typical of small liberal arts colleges, traditionally)? Some women's colleges offer combined master's programs (that are usually co-ed) to allow students to get a master's in social work, business, or engineering as well.

Increasingly, there's a set of women's colleges – Converse, Brenau, Douglass, Saint Catherine's, Mary Baldwin – that are women's colleges within bigger co-ed universities, so the range of major offerings might extend beyond a traditional liberal arts college. Douglass Residential College, as an example, is the only women's college housed within a public research institution (Rutgers University), meaning that while it functions like a smaller liberal arts college residentially, it operates a bit more like a research institution academically.

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# So, how do I differentiate women's colleges?

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If you're someone who is drawn to women's colleges as a space to talk about identity, take a look at the women's studies major. First, do they have one? If they do, what's it called? Just the phrasing of the major can tell you something about the outlook or approach of a school. Is it Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (Scripps), Comparative Women's Studies (Spelman), or something else? Does it align with what you want to learn more about?

Since women's colleges are liberal arts colleges, most will also have a core curriculum, which is a set of courses (or categories) you must fulfill before you graduate. What these colleges prioritize in that core curriculum tells you a lot about what they value, and what they feel a well-rounded education should include. You can typically find an overview of requirements by searching "college name + core curriculum."

Finally, some colleges offer specific programs that speak to a particular strength: St. Catherine's has an [ASL interpreter major](#), Alverno has both a [nursing and a pharmaceutical sciences program](#), Moore College of Art & Design has an [Animation and Game Arts major](#), and Bryn Mawr offers a [Museum Studies minor](#). The range – and specificity – of their major offerings offers insight into what they value and what students there pursue.

# Common qualities of strong women's college applicants

While many of these traits are just downright great qualities for any colleges, I'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 admissions office, women's college admissions officers are looking for a wide variety of students. Some will be leaders, some will be followers, and some will just do their own thing altogether. But these three qualities tend to rise to the surface amongst even the most diverse of applicant pools. 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. Initiative

This is a word that often gets confused with leadership, but leadership can more often than not get flattened into a title. Initiative has a lot more to do with action, regardless of what someone's official role might be.

Behind every women's college is a long history of trailblazers. Women who saw a place for those left out of higher education. Women who founded colleges, long before women even had the right to vote. And women who, through the years, forged their way in industries and professions that had long been dominated by men – especially 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. Maybe you started the first video game club at your school, created your own op-ed column in the school newspaper, or founded a Feminist Bird Club chapter. Whatever it is, women's colleges celebrate students who felt bold enough to start something new, question a norm, or strive to make something better than it was before.

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# Common qualities of strong women's college applicants

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In their supplemental essay question in 2020, Bryn Mawr asked students to reflect on their high school experience, considering “What legacy do you hope to leave behind?” Women’s colleges celebrate students who will bring that same spirit to college – and continue to blaze trails in whatever field they choose.

## 2. Curiosity

Though this one overlaps with many liberal arts colleges, women’s colleges in particular look for students who are curious. They 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 who 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. Students who are curious just can’t turn off that lingering feeling of wanting to know more about the world around them. As Barnard asks in their supplemental question, “What are some of the bold questions you have pondered that get you excited, and why do they interest you?” Women’s colleges tend to celebrate those students with big, bold questions.

## 3. Expressiveness

An important quality to bring to any small classroom experience is the ability to express oneself — be that in writing, or through a thoughtful comment. And students who get into women’s colleges (and succeed once they’re there) demonstrate this skill 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 and activists; 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. Women’s colleges are aware that you likely won’t arrive fully confident and ready to express yourself fully, but they get excited about students who exhibit a spark of curiosity paired with an ability to speak up and out.

# Life after women's college

## What happens next?

No discussion of women's colleges is complete without a discussion of the vast data out there about the benefits of these schools. And I'm 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 leadership positions in their own institutions – 90% of women's college presidents are women, and 60+% of [faculty](#) are women.
- Women's college graduates of color pursue [STEM degrees](#) at a much higher rate than liberal arts counterparts (34% compared to 19%).
- Women's college graduates are [more likely to pursue a graduate degree](#) than their co-ed liberal arts and public university counterparts.
- 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:

- **Stacey Abrams, Politician** (*Spelman College*)
- **Gabrielle Giffords, Politician** (*Scripps College*)
- **Benazir Bhutto, First Female Prime Minister of Pakistan** (*Radcliffe College*)
- **Julia Child, Chef** (*Smith College*)
- **Gwen Ifill, Journalist** (*Simmons College*)
- **Hillary Rodham Clinton, Former Secretary of State** (*Wellesley College*)
- **Jhumpa Lahiri, Author** (*Barnard College*)
- **Pamela Melroy, Astronaut** (*Wellesley College*)
- **Nancy Pelosi, Congresswoman & Speaker of the House** (*Trinity Washington College*)
- **Diane Sawyer, Television Reporter** (*Wellesley College*)

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

Putting together authentic and compelling college applications is a topic I could write about at length – greater length than I can about women's colleges. Rather than present you with a treatise on the subject here, I'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:

- Be yourself. Sounds pretty trite, but frankly, the most important advice I give students when completing applications and essays is to avoid trying too hard to impress admissions officers. If you would never say the sentence, "Playing soccer taught me the value of teamwork," don't write it in your college essay. We've all learned big lessons by the time we're 18, but it's usually the stories of how you arrived to those lessons that are most unique to you.
- Talk to current students. The women's college experience tends to have a lot of myths associated with it. Talking with current students can help you get a sense of what life is like day to day.
- Articulate why you think a women's college, and the particular school to which you're applying, is a good fit. The more you ask those questions of yourself, and questions of the colleges you're interested in, the clearer this answer will be.

## DON'T:

- 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 colleges in this guide as women's colleges.
- 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.

*Continued on next page*

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

(continued)

- Make it sound like your decision to apply was not your own. I interviewed applicants to a few women's colleges who made it clear the choice to apply was mostly because of a parent or someone else. This goes for any application, but I hope you're only applying because you can truly envision yourself attending.

If you're looking for more help with your applications, start with the expert on your campus — your high school counselor. They 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 virtual college fairs [here](#). If you want even more help, head over to our [blog](#), check out our [free courses and video series on applying to college](#), or consider working with one of our [counselors](#).

# Further reading and resources

If you're feeling like you just can't get enough of all this women's college talk, I'd recommend heading on over to these websites and resources, which were incredibly helpful in writing and researching for this guide:

1. The [Women's College Coalition](#) is an online community to which all women's colleges belong, and it's a great place to go for data, the history of women's colleges, and a directory of schools.
2. Most women's college websites have a section dedicated to **"why a women's college,"** and these are some of my favorites – though all deserve a shout-out, really!
  - a) [Agnes Scott](#)
  - b) [Scripps](#)
  - c) [Mt. Holyoke](#)
3. For all you data and education nerds out there, [Examining the Value and Utility of a Women's College Education in North America](#), published in partnership with the Women's College Coalition in 2020, is by far the most thorough, data-driven analysis of the make-up and outcomes of women's colleges today. The first paper in the collection, "Access and Opportunity at American Women's Colleges: Contemporary Findings," by Dr. Kathryn A. E. Enke, was central to the research for this guide, and it provided some of the only data out there on retention, completion, and social mobility outcomes at women's colleges compared to liberal arts colleges.
4. Similarly, [this law school paper](#) from 2019 (I promise, more thrilling than it sounds!) from Elizabeth Heise has a comprehensive look at the evolving admission and enrollment policies for trans students at women's colleges.

# About the Author



[Casey Near](#)

Executive Director of Counseling

After transferring from the University of Pennsylvania to Scripps College, Casey caught the college admissions bug and hasn't turned back. She started as a professional backwards walker (tour guide) at Scripps, then helped run visit programs for the admissions office. After graduation, she returned to her Bay Area home to work as an admissions counselor at Mills College, where she ran the tour program, assisted with transfer admissions, and convinced people that women's colleges are indeed a wonderful idea.

In 2013, she opened the first Collegewise expansion office in the Bay Area and found her true professional fit. After a year of backpacking and working around the world in 2016 (and collecting a few stories along the way), she returned to her counseling and now serves as our Executive Director of Counseling

## **Education & Experience**

Former Admissions Counselor, Mills College  
Summa cum laude graduate, Scripps College  
Outstanding Collegewise Counselor Award, 2014  
Collegewise Counselor of the Year, 2017  
Collegewise Wiser of the Year, 2020

# Want more?

If you'd like to learn more about how we can help you or your students enjoy a more joyful college admissions process, just reach out and ask.

Collegewise is a private college counseling company that embraces 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.

## Collegewise's counseling programs

<https://collegewise.com/services>

Collegewise counselors work with students in-person and online. Contact us to learn more.

## Our free stuff

<https://collegewise.com/resources>

Check out Collegewise's complete collection of free advice!

## Runway

This is a series of college planning programs and resources (all for free!)

<http://go.collegewise.com/runway>

## Our website

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

## Our social media

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