

## ELITELORE OF NEW U.S. COLLEGE “FEMINISTS”

After Class, Skimpy Equality

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

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AT Duke University last fall, members of the Sigma Nu fraternity e-mailed 300 of their female classmates about an off-campus Halloween party. “Hey Ladies,” the invitation leered, complete with a misspelling, “Whether your dressing up as a slutty nurse, a slutty doctor, a slutty schoolgirl or just a total slut, we invite you...”

Yes, there was outrage: in the form of fliers plastered around the Duke campus reprinting the offending e-mail and asking, “Is this why you came to Duke?” And there was official indignation: The recently formed Greek Women’s Initiative will be tackling the subject of gender relations.

But a less-noted fact remains: hundreds of Duke women went to that Halloween party and many dressed as they had been asked.

As parents around the country send their children to campuses for the start of another academic year, what are we to make of the fact that lessons of equality, respect and self-worth have been heard when it comes to the classroom, but lost somewhere on the way to the clubs? Why has the pendulum swung back to a feeling that sexualization of women is fun and funny rather than insulting and uncomfortable? Why are so many women O.K. with that? Odds are that the women dancing at that Duke party had mothers who attended more than one Take Back the Night march in their college days. What has changed?

I’ve been puzzling over this since last year, when I returned to Princeton University to teach, more than two decades after I had graduated. The women I met were outspoken, self-confident and unapologetic about running rings around their male cohorts in the classroom. That was a marked change from my day, when there were nearly two men to one woman on campus, and we felt a little like guests in the boys’ club treehouse.

I wasn’t surprised by the progress, though. The male-female ratio is essentially equal now, and the message of female achievement comes from the top: the university’s president is just one of many powerful women on campus.

What stunned me was what was happening outside class, where women seemed not to have budged in decades. In social settings and in relationships, men set the pace, made the rules and acted as they had in the days when women were still “less than.” It might as well have been the 1950s, but with skimpier clothing, fewer inhibitions and better birth control.

Initiations at my former Princeton eating club now include women dancing in their underwear and a sick room, complete with an on-call emergency medical technician for those who can't handle the drinks that fuel that dancing.

And it is not just at Princeton and Duke where you can find gender relationships that would not be described as evolved. At the University of Southern California, a viral e-mail sent by a member of the Kappa Sigma fraternity described women as "targets" who "aren't actual people like us men," then set out the guidelines men should use in rating their conquests. (The fraternity itself expressed outrage, distancing itself from the member.)

At Yale, the Delta Kappa Epsilon chapter paraded through campus last fall chanting ditties like "No means yes, and yes means anal," which was filmed and posted on The Yale Daily News Web site. (Again, there was outrage: Sixteen students filed a civil rights complaint against the university, and the fraternity was suspended for five years. But, more tellingly, the complaint was roundly criticized by some women interviewed by The Yale Daily News, who said that what looked like sexism was really all in good fun.)

At Washington and Lee University, Ali Greenberg, a student newspaper columnist, argued in May that women on campus diminished one another more than any man did. Lunch conversation at sororities "generally follow a boys-and-beer pattern," she wrote, while dinner consists of "judging other girls ... 'Do you think she is pretty?' 'She gets around,' 'Why are guys into her? I just don't see it.'"

I taught a class about the tools of journalism, and so I recently asked my (now former) students to take their interviewing skills, and help me explore this disconnect. Their peers would talk to them, I guessed, more honestly than they would talk to me. The interviews that follow were student to student.

I wanted to know: How do these social norms look from within? Apparently just as unbalanced as they seem from outside. Though exactly who has more power, men or women, is a subject of some debate. To many it is clear that the men are in charge. "It's usually the guys who are throwing the social events and the girls are guests, so it gives them power over the girls," explained one female junior at the University of Utah. "You feel privileged, because the host is paying attention to you. I've seen girls go off with guys they otherwise wouldn't have because the guy was the host."

Jared Griffin, a Princeton junior, more or less agreed. The center of social life on the campus is Prospect Street, home to mansions that house the eating clubs, many of which were still all male when I was a student, and now are all co-ed. "When the guys go to the Street they are laid-back, casual, like they are going to class," he said. "But the women come in, in short cocktail dresses, makeup, high heels. Sometimes it can be like if you're a girl and you don't dress up, there's a social expectation that you should dress up and you should appear sexually available."

On the other hand, he asked, isn't that a kind of female power? "A guy is more or less dependent on the women receiving his advances so if she is not interested, then tough luck for him," Mr. Griffin said. "I think that in a way the girls relish that power. They can pick and say, 'I'm not interested in that guy.'"

Whichever way they thought the balance tipped, the students interviewed essentially believed the "he chases, she submits" paradigm was no big deal. Boys will be boys, said Nora Taranto, 20, a history of science major at Princeton, who is particularly interested in neuroscience. "It's just the way that drunk frat guys act," she said of the antics of pledges on her campus and others. "Well, besides the naked runs through lectures, which I guess could be offensive to some people but weren't offensive to me, not really."

They all get to the generational card eventually, believing that parents are too uptight; being free to flaunt your assets as you do your intellect is a new kind of empowerment, they say. "When I talked about it with my mom, she didn't understand that there were in-betweens between friends and relationships," said a female junior at the University of Virginia. "That you could be unofficial. So I think it's just a generational difference. It really just depends on the girl. Some girls just really like to have sex."

Or, as the female University of Utah junior put it, college isn't supposed to adhere to the rules of the real world. "Personally, I think that this is the time in your life when you're most experimental," she said. "It's the designated time to try new things and get stuff out of your system. If parents were still in our mindset, they would understand. I think that every person has been there, but I think when I grow up I will look back and think it's unhealthy. Because it's animalistic. But it's just what happens at this stage."

So, is this all harmless? Late last spring, Princeton hosted 1,300 alumnae for a weekend celebration of progress called "She Roars." Justice Sonia Sotomayor was there. (Justice Elena Kagan could not attend.) So was Meg Whitman, former chief executive of eBay, and Wendy Kopp, chief executive and founder of Teach for America, as well as two members of Congress, a few best-selling authors and heads of corporations and universities. The first night, student a-cappella groups performed, and for one song the all-male Nassoons serenaded one lone member of the all-female Tigerlilies, who pretended to have wandered, lost, onto the stage. Keeping the rhythm, the men pantomimed unzipping their flies and thrusting their pelvises.

In an essay in *The Christian Science Monitor* soon afterward, the singer Tina deVaron, who was in the audience, compared the performance with mimed gang rape, and told the story of her own rape by a fellow student when she was at Princeton in 1973. What the performers onstage that night saw as ribald fun, she wrote, was at the root of statistics like "one in four women will be sexually assaulted on a college campus."

The response to Ms. deVaron was as mixed as that to my student interviewers. Many readers were appalled and wondered where these students' parents had gone wrong. Others saw it as no big deal, and even suggested it was a response to the prissiness of earlier generations, who saw every male and female interaction as symbolic rather than fun.

"College campuses can no longer afford to be complicit in this culture" of inequity, she wrote.

True, we need to take a new look at what we are teaching our children, and also at what they may have to teach us.

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