



Meredith College juniors Diamond McClendon, left, Astin Frick and Whitney Parker head to class after lunch. As many U.S. women's colleges struggle, Meredith has a record freshman class and has raised \$41 million.

Staff Photos by Shawn Rocco

All women, and thriving

Meredith and Peace show women's colleges can prosper

Jane Stancill, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - Women's colleges have been folding or going coed in this country since the late 1960s, when women were allowed in universities in large numbers. There are just 51 women's colleges left in the United States, two fewer than a year ago. But in Raleigh, there is an unusual countercurrent: Single-sex education appears to be thriving.

This fall, Meredith College enrolled its largest ever freshman class. Both Meredith and Peace College have raised tens of millions of dollars, recruited many more minority students and started international partnerships. They're planning for growth and marketing themselves to high school students as places for women to become empowered leaders.

In the survival-of-the-fittest world of private higher education, Meredith and Peace are rising above the forces that have driven some women's colleges out of business. They have broadened their reach and reshaped their mission to serve women in a changing world.

But another element of their success is that old real estate adage: location, location, location.

Laura Bingham, president of Peace College, said her school is rising with Wake County's economic boom and Raleigh's increasingly robust downtown. The school is located just north of the legislative mall and is adjacent to a new housing development that was previously the site of public housing.

"It's been fabulous," Bingham said. "The neighborhood is helping us for the first time in 50 years."

Last month, Meredith President Maureen Hartford celebrated the end of a fundraising campaign that brought in more than \$41 million, about half of which will go to student scholarships and financial aid for study abroad. Later this month, the Meredith board will consider a plan to build an apartment-style dorm on the West Raleigh campus on Hillsborough Street. First-year students reached a record 434 this fall, though total undergraduate enrollment is 1,770, down from 1,890 in 2000.

Meredith has altered the way it sells itself. Word-of-mouth attention, passed down through the generations, doesn't work in a state with a lot of newcomers, Hartford said.

"We have really changed our focus on marketing in the past few years to focus on as much the outcomes of women's education, things we know -- women who have stronger voices, greater self-confidence, a trust in their own leadership

skills as a result of having been at a single-gender institution," she said. "But also focusing on the fact that this is a place that does understand how women learn and how that may be different than how men learn."

It's ironic, she said, that at a time when women make up 57 percent of U.S. higher-education students, many universities aren't doing more to adapt to women's learning styles, which are more collaborative and flourish in small settings.

"I have seen very little going on in coeducational institutions that suggests that there's a passion for taking care of what is now their majority," said Hartford, who was an administrator at the University of Michigan before she came to Meredith in 1999.

Three years ago, Duke University added a program that operates almost like a mini-women's college within a university. The Baldwin Scholars Program grew out of former Duke President Nan Keohane's Women's Initiative, which found that female students at Duke felt social pressure to be perfect, yet not outshine the men.

Women have been the majority on many campuses for more than 20 years, said Susan Lennon, executive director of the Connecticut-based Women's College Coalition. "It doesn't mean the culture has changed," Lennon said. "I think we still have a long way to go."

The new president of Harvard is a graduate of a women's college, as are many women in politics, business and other fields. A survey last year by Indiana University researchers found that students at women's colleges reported a more satisfying academic experience and greater confidence in their leadership skills than women at coeducational institutions.

'Everyone is really helpful'

Meredith's personal touch captivated Erin Huber, a freshman who accepted one of Meredith's first alumnae legacy scholarships, which provides the full cost of her education -- tuition, room, board and books.

"One of the things that I noticed after I applied was how much communication I got from them," she said of Meredith. "It's been like that ever since I got here. Everyone is really friendly, really helpful. They want you to have the best first-year experience you can."

She turned down admission offers from American University, William & Mary, the University of Virginia and the University of Richmond. While in high school in the Moore County town of Cameron, Huber never imagined herself at a women's college.

Debbie Cottrell, provost at Peace, said women's colleges have to understand the market and make their pitch where it will resonate.

There is a tiny population of high school girls -- maybe 1 percent or 2 percent -- who seek out a women's college, Cottrell said. And there is a big group, she said, who won't consider a women's college no matter what.

But there is another group of girls who aren't particularly interested in a women's college but can see their way there because of something else -- a family connection, a good scholarship, a certain major or maybe an attractive location such as Raleigh.

That's the group to go after, Cottrell said. And women's colleges have found ways to persuade them.

At Peace, Aimee Austin posed against a black backdrop for one of the slick new marketing posters with the slogan, "Peace strengthens."

"Choosing who you want to be is hard," says Austin's quote on the poster. "It's like my microbiology class. The answers don't come easy. But at Peace, I'm learning how to ask the right questions."

Peace, which celebrates its 150th anniversary this year, has settled into its new role as a four-year college. The college shed its prep school and junior college programs in 1995 to become a four-year degree institution. A decade ago, St. Mary's went the other route, dropping its college program to become a girls' high school.

Peace has revamped its curriculum and beefed up the academic requirements, which include statistics or calculus, advanced writing and a cross-cultural experience. Peace also recently added a teacher education program for both undergraduates and adult students -- and now offers night classes to capture the adult education market.

Both campuses admit more international students. Peace kicked off an exchange program with Qatar, and Meredith has two students on scholarship from Afghanistan.

And both Peace and Meredith are recruiting from a more diverse pool of students. From 1999 to 2006, minority representation increased from 9 percent to 17 percent at Meredith and from 9 percent to 22 percent at Peace.

Gone is the finishing school atmosphere. "It's not a campus for rich kids," Hartford said.

The campuses have invested more in financial aid to draw students from all economic backgrounds, apparently without compromising their financial health with steep tuition discounts. Those have been the death knell for some other schools.

Against the tide

Nationally, three women's colleges have gone coed in the past two years to avoid extinction. Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia changed its name and welcomed men for the first time this fall. The college is so financially strapped that it is auctioning part of its prized art collection in hopes of turning around a budget deficit.

"The ones that remain have all made some pretty smart and significant choices and changes in terms of making sure that they're staying relevant," Cottrell said. "Higher ed is tough no matter what, the competition is tough. ... I think women's colleges have to be the smartest colleges on the block if they're going to survive, because there's too much that works against them -- the tide is against them."

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