

Weigh the Pros, Cons of Attending a Women's College in the 21st Century

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While women are supported in all kinds of areas of study, the social scene can be lacking, say current and former students.



Hillary Clinton, the first female presidential nominee of a major U.S. political party, is one of many notable female leaders who went to a women's college. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

When looking at schools, Kelly Alexander loved everything about [Wellesley College](#) – the faculty, campus, small classes and more – but she was apprehensive about one thing.

"I kept saying to people, 'I just wish there were boys there,'" she says. But now, four years later, the 22-year-old recent graduate says she is an evangelist for women's colleges and would attend Wellesley again because it's an all-female school – not in spite of it.

Alexander, who studied economics and Spanish, joins a network of [women's college graduates](#) that includes many notable female leaders. Hillary Clinton, the first female presidential nominee of a major U.S. party, went to Wellesley.

"We've been so important in terms of developing women for these historic roles," says Joy St. John, dean of admission and financial aid at Wellesley, on the role of women's colleges.

While there aren't as many women's colleges as there were in 1960 – [about 230 existed](#) – a few dozen remain and may be the right fit for some students. Families should consider the following benefits and drawbacks of women's colleges when weighing their options.

Pro: Women are supported and represented in all occupations and areas of study. "A women's college is an area where all types of women are celebrated in all their glory," says Jasmine Ponder, a 21-year-old senior studying economics at [Agnes Scott College](#) in Georgia. Whatever it is she wants to do, there is someone affiliated with the school doing it – and that's inspiring, she says.

The psychological benefits of attending an institution where everything is solely for women are huge, says Alexander, the recent Wellesley grad. Women hold all the leadership positions, the resources are dedicated to women and these schools were built for women – not men.

Con: Alumnae may not be ready to take on men at work. The women's college environment Irnande Altema, a 2007 graduate of [Notre Dame of Maryland University](#), experienced during her undergraduate years was almost too comfortable. Now 31 and the chief of staff for Maryland State Senator Kathy Klausmeier, Altema says everyone was caring at Notre Dame, the students, faculty and security, but the world of work isn't always like that – especially in her industry.

While competition amongst women at the school was always friendly, sometimes competing with men can be truly intense, says Altema, who is also an attorney.

It would have been helpful to learn some tactics of male competitors, such as how men talk up their accomplishments and the way they seek a promotion. Men use the word "I" more often than "we" and are quicker than women to seek a promotion, she says.

She also didn't realize the value of a male mentor until she went to law school. Altema's had several male mentors since and says they're helpful to have in her line of work.

Pro: Students can build a network of supportive female peers. Alexander says she struggled to have close relationships with women in high school. She was surprised at how she immediately liked the women at Wellesley.

"People think that a bunch of women in one place, it's just going to be like ripping each other's eyes out all the time," she says. That's a false stereotype, she says; women like each other.

Alexander says sometimes people are skeptical when they learn she attended a women's college.

"They think that we are convents," she says. "Either that or they think we are like lesbian, feminist paradises."

Studies show women's colleges are among the most diverse higher education institutions in the country, says Elizabeth Kiss, president of Agnes Scott College and chairwoman of the Women's College Coalition. Many are very [inclusive of transgender students](#) as well, she says, though admissions policies vary.

Con: The social scene is not for everyone. Heterosexual women will need to put slightly more effort into dating, says Alexander, since there aren't many men around.

Because of this, Alexander says she didn't experience the so called "hookup culture" found at other college campuses.

Students looking for a "party school" atmosphere probably aren't going to find it at women's colleges, says Kiss.

Families should be aware that in recent years, some women's colleges have gone coed – [Sweet Briar College](#) in Virginia notably risked closure amid financial pressures and dwindling enrollments. While it is a good idea for families to do their homework and ask questions when vetting schools, Kiss says parents don't need to be overly concerned about schools closing or going coed. The number of schools struggling is small – and it's likely they have been for a while.

And it's likely schools struggling have issues that stem from being small, private colleges – not necessarily because they are women's institutions, Kiss says. Four women's colleges, including Agnes Scott, saw their highest enrollment in the fall of 2015, Kiss says.

To get a better understanding of a college's financial situation, Kiss says families could ask whether enrollment has been growing or declining over the past three years and inquire about fundraising, levels of alumnae giving and endowment.

Alexander says women's colleges are known for helping women develop confidence. While that holds true, she says, there is a place for women at these schools who already possess this trait.

"You don't have to be like a timid wallflower to go to a place like Wellesley and get an enormous benefit from it."

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