

1974 Commencement Speech

Imagine yourself a woman, walking into a classroom, and being addressed as “Gentlemen.” Imagine yourself walking into the gym, and being told that you need a male escort, in order to use the ping-pong tables. Or, imagine yourself ill enough to need the use of the infirmary overnight, and being offered a converted broom closet as accommodation, because men were in the regular hospital room.

This was the Johns Hopkins University in 1970 and 1971, when it first began to admit undergraduate women. At the same time, women in society at large were beginning to focus dramatically and effectively, on correcting the inequalities of our system. In recognition of the changing status of women, Hopkins admitted its first undergraduate females four years ago.

Some of us were accepted directly from high school, but most of us were transfer students. Since we aspired to professional goals, we chose Hopkins because of its academic reputation. When we first came here, many of us found that we were not entirely welcome. A great number of men came to Johns Hopkins not wholly receptive to the addition of undergraduate women. There were those who resented the intrusion of women into their male sanctuary; there were those who considered women incapable of surviving academic pressures; and there were those who feared women would be equal competitors. In many instances we felt unusually isolated from the rest of the community. At times we felt compelled to prove ourselves superior, in order to be considered equal. It was even more difficult to understand, why we were being ignored by administrators, fund raisers, and faculty, who supposedly had wanted us to participate fully in Hopkins life.

Despite discouragement, we have grown from our contact with this university, as well as contributed to its growth. We have an active women’s center and our own intercollegiate sports. Women now hold office in some previously male bastions such as the Newsletter, the debate council, and the Student council. Attitudes are slowly changing as men become accustomed to working with women instead of merely socializing with them.

Now, after four years of coeducation, we feel the University has a responsibility to future classes, women and men. Johns Hopkins should have a positive admissions policy, which would expend as much energy in actively recruiting women as men. There should no longer be any excuse for limiting the number of women accepted at Hopkins. Many students also feel that there is a lack of women in administrative and academic positions. The University should actively recruit and hire qualified females to fill these places.

In the future, Hopkins women should not have to experience any more dramatic transitions. We hope that they will be a part of the process of change, reflecting the growth of the larger institution. In contrast, we in this graduating class were the instruments of change. Our unique experiences, however, have not prevented us from maintaining our high ambitions: 80% of the women graduating today are going on in higher education, and then professional careers. We will be the doctors, scientists, lawyers, politicians, and professionals of tomorrow. We as women expect to work to abolish the social stereotypes for ourselves and for others, as this society begins to acknowledge the capabilities of all its members.