Rutgers' Douglass College is national model for all-female schools: Opinion

By Jacquelyn Litt

All-female schools once flourished and were the primary option for young women who wanted a liberal arts higher education. In 1960, America was home to more than 200 all-women colleges and universities; today there are fewer than 50. Douglass Residential College at Rutgers University-New Brunswick is one of them.

Douglass today stands alone as the only all-female residential college at a flagship public research university in the nation. Through its wide array of academic opportunities, Rutgers is perhaps the best place to spearhead this new model for higher education — a world-class research university that includes an institution focused entirely on the success and advancement of undergraduate women within its structure.

Are women’s colleges still necessary in an era when women make up more than 50 percent of the college population? Absolutely. In fact, the Douglass Residential College model — an all-
women’s residential college within a leading public research university – may be the prototype for women who seek both the benefits of an all-female college and the resources and options of a major public research university.

It is clearly the prototype for success.

Douglass students today number 2,300 and represent a community of women invested in their own and each other's success. Douglass' programs include a first-year common course that provides a shared exploration of the status of women, advising for students in adjusting to college, and career development and leadership opportunities. Douglass also offers a four-year academic engagement curriculum for any female undergraduate student at Rutgers University – New Brunswick.

Douglass caters to the wide variety of students' interests, with an historic specialization for advancing women in science, math, engineering and technology majors. While at Douglass, students are provided with customized programs, including peer mentors, themed and language housing, active student clubs, a student government, scholarships and global education.

Because enrollment at Douglass is open to any undergraduate woman at any academic school at Rutgers University-New Brunswick, we attract highly motivated students who are interested in advancing themselves, developing leadership skills and experience, and finding unique educational opportunities.

Data suggest that our students make a wise choice. Our partnership with Rutgers’ School of Engineering, for example, has increased both the recruitment and retention of women engineering students to record levels. Research has documented that Douglass students exhibit higher levels of global awareness and engagement than do Rutgers women generally. National studies indicate that women at single sex colleges tend to be more actively engaged in learning, more likely to engage in higher level thinking, and better prepared for graduate work or the job market than women at co-educational colleges. These women also report stronger feelings of support and community.

Women's college graduates make up only a small percent of the college-educated population, yet nearly one-third of the women board members of the Fortune 1000 companies are women's college graduates and one-in-five women in Congress attended women's colleges.

Think women’s college graduates and think Hilary Clinton, Christie Whitman or Madeline Albright. Think Gloria Steinem, Cokie Roberts or Diane Sawyer. Think Jaynee LaVecchia; Freda Wolfson; Ruth Ann Burns Janet Evanovich or Gwen Ifill.

Research done by the Women’s College Coalition cites other distinct benefits of the women’s college experience. In comparison to co-educational institutions, women’s colleges provide
students with greater opportunities for participation, build higher self-esteem in their students, display better retention and completion rates, and lead to better-paying jobs.

Women in the 21st century are poised to have unprecedented influence on the course of world affairs. Their education is essential to securing a future of peace, prosperity and human well-being. The unique combination of a Douglass education — a mission-focused education — within a pre-eminent national research university sets the stage for women’s contributions to this future.

Indeed, the structure of Douglass Residential College may well be the best model for women’s education in the century to come.

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