Could the Girls be Counseled?

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“Could the girls be counseled . . .” was a line from a 1959 letter from Margie Helm, director of Library Services, to Western Kentucky State College President Kelly Thompson (Helm, 1959). Director Helm was dismayed by the “girls” coming to the library in shorts, wearing curlers out on the campus, etc. While shorts wearing was prohibited for the males (never referred to as “boys” in any Western documentation) as well, the entire dress code in practice was only obsessed over when applicable to females. The Western “girls” of the late 1950s and early 1960s were in fact being “counseled,” both overtly and covertly, in the discriminatory mores of American higher education.

Sue Williams Spurlock was born February 7, 1940 and grew up in Logan County, Kentucky on a 50 acre farm located between Russellville and Lewisburg. Sue’s mother, Bessie Williams, was a fourth grade teacher and her father, Ernst Williams, was the Logan County Circuit Court Clerk. She attended elementary and high school in the same building, Lewisburg Elementary and High School. Sue was the third child in a family of four siblings. Her two older sisters attended the University of Kentucky, and her younger brother attended Western.

After graduating Lewisburg High in 1959, Sue enrolled in Western Kentucky State College in the fall of 1959. Enrollment at Western in 1959-1960 was 2,918 with in-state tuition at $45 per semester in-state, and out-of-state $90 (Western Catalogue, 1960).

Sue’s decision to attend college was not hers, but her parents’.

I did not make that decision (to go to college). I wanted to join the women’s military. I was going to be a WAC. My mother said I was going to Western. It was known as a
good school. She and daddy had decided that teaching was a ‘Depression proof job,’ quote and end quote. Because they had lived through the Depression, and my mother was always employable because she had gone to Western and studied teaching. Anyway, they decided this was something I needed to do, but all the time I knew if there was any way I could escape the profession I would. They (parents) kind of chose my major too (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

That major was Home Economics.

My major was selected by my parents. It was Home Economics. There was no minor because they required so many hours of Home Economics. You had to take a lot of chemistry, biology, sociology, psychology. A lot of people think Home Economics is a dumb major, but you have to study all aspects of family life. Economics, you have to learn how to manage the family money, the family budget. I did learn a lot in spite of myself and I made fair grades in spite of myself (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

The sexism that was pervasive during the period determined what career path she could “choose.” The unwritten reality was that women attending college in south central Kentucky in 1959 could “choose” teaching, and very little else. Other professional careers available to females in the area included: teaching, librarian, secretarial/bookkeeping work or nursing. Women of the era wishing to study nursing could not do so at Western, but had to travel to Nashville for the closest nursing education program (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).
According to John Thelin (2004) in *A History of American Higher Education*, enrollment as a result of the GI Bill by returning male veterans of WWII had a tremendous impact of the educational fates of their female peers, and on their daughters years later. By 1950, 2 million returning GIs had enrolled in the program. In 1939, women accounted for 40 percent of the US collegiate enrollment. In 1950, that rate was down to 32 percent. As Thelin writes, “one consequence of the GI Bill was to masculinize the postwar campus . . . intensifying the split between typically male field of study and those deemed appropriate for women” (p. 267).

Educational researcher Stacey Jones (2009) explored this theme as well observing that, women received 43 percent of the bachelor’s degrees awarded in America during the 1964-65 academic year, however, they were concentrated in so called “female fields” such as home economics, and teacher education. It is shocking that the percentage of doctoral degrees awarded to American women had actually fallen four percent from 1920 to 1965. Both society and universities viewed education secondary to a women’s true “place” in life as a wife and mother. Teaching was seen as a career that was compatible with this philosophy (Jones, 2009).

In the 1961 Western yearbook, the *Talisman*, there are 315 pictured seniors, of which 136 are females. For each photo, a major is listed. When two are listed, author is assuming that student was a double major (text is verbatim from yearbook- some majors separated with a comma, some with an ampersand). Sixty one percent of the female senior class of 1961 was divided amongst three majors: Elementary Education, Home Economics, and Commerce (Western Talisman, 1961).

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<th>Major</th>
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<td>English &amp; French</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home Economics</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>History</td>
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A perusal through the 1960 *Western Course Catalogue* indicates that the language does not restrict certain course majors to males. The only linguistic mention of differing classes for the sexes was with some physical education classes (Western Catalogue, 1960). In practice, however, women who expressed interest and wished to enroll in what were considered traditional “male” majors (example: physics) were told simply that, “Girls do not major in that,” by professors, department heads and deans.

At Western, the high concentration of female Elementary Education majors was driven both by the limited major choice and by Western’s institutional mission. Reflecting on what she perceived to be the institutional mission of Western as a freshman in 1959, Sue observed,

I would say it was still very much to train teachers, because you still had a number in this area teaching elementary and high school who did not have a degree. They probably had two years college. At that time a lot of these teachers would drive to Western on
Saturdays trying to complete their degree and they would go to school every summer. A car load of them would drive in here from Glasgow, Butler County, and Logan County.

Did they have to get their masters? (Interviewer)

No, if you had one degree back then you had a job for life (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

In the 1960 Western Course Catalogue, the writer/s clearly outlined, “The Purpose of Western. . . Western Kentucky State College exists to serve all the talented youth of Kentucky and to provide an education which will enable them to become leaders in their communities . . .” (p. 11). The catalogue goes on to specify Teacher Education as the first aim of the institution, followed in succession by Liberal Arts Education, Professional and Pre-Professional Education and Cultural and Educational Extension of the College as successive aims of the institution (Western Course Catalogue, 1960).

When studying the limited majors available to females, the social mores of south central Kentucky need to be examined as well. These mores, combined with the in parentis locus mentality of colleges of the era, all worked together to establish a second class female citizenry on campus.

With females this manifested itself not only in limited major selection, but also in sexist conventions like differing curfews, dress codes, etc. than their male peers. Sue’s college experiences share similarities with her male counterparts; however, due to her sex her experiences were also fundamentally different. I addressed these early 1960s Western sexist conventions at length in my Artifact III paper, “Done for the Student’s Benefit.”
Sue lived in the dorm, and the dorm rules for women were fundamentally different and far more restrictive than those for the men.

Western Residence Hall Regulations for men of the period, consisted of a two page document for the men extorting them to not bring barbells into the dormitory, and that fireworks and/or firearms were prohibited (Welcome to Western, n.p.). For the women, there was a detailed, far more restrictive, five page document, Western KY State College Residence Halls for Women Residence Hall Guide

In addition to the curfews imposed upon women seven days a week, women had to have permission from both their parents and the dorm director in order to go out of town. If a female student was simply going home for the weekend, she did not need the above. If going home, she “simply” had to fill out an “out of town slip” and obtain a dorm staff member’s signature 24 hours in advance. Upon return, she had to sign herself in using the same “out of town slip,” sort of like a human version of a library book (Western KY State College Residence Halls for Women Residence Hall Guide, 1961-62).

For Sue, trips back home to Lewisburg during the semester averaged one a month. Sue did not own an automobile or have access to one on campus. WKU students returning to Logan County could flag the Fuqua Bus Co. bus down in front of Van Meter Hall. One could pay the bus driver directly and the bus would deliver students to Russellville. On occasion, Sue and others would pay fellow students to drive them back to Logan County (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

Like other undergraduates around the country, Sue took an interest the world beyond Western and her home county. The charismatic John Fitzgerald Kennedy visited Bowling Green,
KY October 8, 1960 on a campaign stop. The Western campus was abuzz with his impending visit, and Sue wanted very much to attend the rally in downtown Bowling Green. Unfortunately, her sorority was holding a function at the same time and Sue did not have the funds to “pay the fine” for missing. Sue regretted the threat of being fined, made her miss an opportunity to see a man who would go on to become an American cultural icon.

I did join a sorority, Phi Sigma Upsilon. We called ourselves Phi Sigs. My older sister had helped found it. She wasn’t in on it the very first semester, but was the second. Probably one of the initial 20 members of the sorority. And again it is family influence. She wanted me to join, the girls were her friends. It was kind of like I was drafted into it.

The sorority event was scheduled a long time before the JFK stop was announced. Event had something to do with rush and pledges. Many people were interested but not everyone was a much into politics as I was . . . like my family was (her father was an elected official). I really hated that mother and daddy were going to be there and get to see him and I wasn’t (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

Sue, a Protestant, remembered many of her Catholic friends being very excited and supportive of Kennedy’s presidential bid, thinking his election could help end or certainly ease anti-Catholic sentiments. In November, Sue voted for the very first time in her life, and she voted for Kennedy.

In addition to the popular young presidential candidate, Sue’s generation was also part of the beginnings of public school integration in south central Kentucky. The Supreme Court Decision of 1954 of Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education was a catalyst for integration of public education facilities. Volatile resistance to integration in public education reared its ugly
head in several locations across America; however, Sue did not recall any overt, news making protest in the area. Lewisburg High, where Sue attended high school, was integrated during her sophomore year, in that one African American student enrolled in her class (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

According to a letter written by President Kelly Thompson (Thompson, 1961) Western voluntarily integrated June 7, 1956 the first day of the summer term. Total enrollment in 1961 was 3,491 white students and 22 Black students. By 1963 President Thompson reported white enrollment of 5836 with 96 black students. There were 228 faculty members; all white (Thompson, 1963).

Sue did not remember the total enrollment of black students at Western when she began in 1959. To her, it seemed like just a handful of students, “There were I think, (1959) five African Americans at Western. Like three girls and two boys. They were always together. They hung out in front of the library which then was Gordon Wilson Hall. They were always seated out on the concrete steps there” (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

Sue Williams Spurlock transferred to University of Kentucky for her junior year, “to be closer to John.” She would not complete her degree in Home Economics at UK, but would quit a few courses short of a degree and marry John Howard Spurlock.

In contrast to Sue’s circumscribed college major choice, John Spurlock, headed into his 1958 freshman year with the entire curriculum available for his choosing.

John Spurlock was born October 22, 1939 in Midkiff, West Virginia. He attended high school at Castle Heights Military Academy in Lebanon, TN and received an excellent college preparatory private education. He enrolled in West Virginia University in the fall of 1958,
majoring in English. John had known since seventh grade that he wanted to become an English professor. Unlike Sue, John knew with full confidence that he could major in absolutely any field offered by WVU (J. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

After graduating with a degree in English from WVU, John took his first job teaching and coaching football at Guyan Valley High School in Hamlin, West Virginia. Sue, as his young bride, accompanied him and taught Home Economics and was also the cheerleader sponsor. The young couple spent many hours together on a school bus traveling to and from high school football games. After a year, John enrolled in graduate school at the University of Louisville and Sue managed to “escape the profession,” that she never wanted to enter in the first place.

If Sue was entering college today, she would major in some form of engineering or pre law, both of which she has an aptitude for and a deep interest in. As a little girl, she enjoyed taking things apart, “to see how they worked.” Over a lifetime she has done quite a bit of shade tree mechanic work on cars, tractors, and lawnmowers, basic carpentry, masonry and electricity electing to become her own building contractor when she could not find a suitable one.

Sue worked through her high school years, and summers home from college in the Logan County Circuit Court Clerk’s office for her father. Watching lawyers at trial and interacting with them, she thinks she might have pursed a law degree; however that was not a practical option for an 18-year-old female in 1959.

The relatively rapid transformation with women from universities seeking to promote a good marriage to a viable and satisfying career, according to Jones (2009) was a “culmination of multiple causal factors,” (p. 249)
Beginnings of this new way of thinking could be found with John Kennedy. The handsome presidential candidate, who visited Bowling Green during Sue’s sophomore year, would go on to form the President’s Commission on the Status of Women in December of 1961.

If our Nation is to be successful in the critical period ahead, we must rely upon the skills and devotion of all our people. In every time of crisis women have served our country in difficult and hazardous ways. They do so now, in the home and at work. We naturally deplore those economic conditions which require women to work unless they desire to do so, and the programs of the Administration are designed to improve family incomes so that women can make their own decision in this area. Women should not be considered a marginal group to be employed periodically only to be denied opportunity to satisfy their needs and aspirations when unemployment rises or a war ends. (Kennedy, 1961)

The report by the PCSW would have lasting impact and eventually lead to the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Educational institutions were initially exempt from Title VII’s anti discriminatory provisions, but the groundwork was laid for later challenges to discrimination based on sex in educational institutions (Wayne State, n.d.).

Beginning in the mid-1960s, students across America began pushing back against collegiate administrations and their arcane restrictions for women. It would not be until the 1967-68 and the 1968-69 Western Student Handbook that there would be significant changes to student policies and regulations. Western did not let up on the reigns entirely with women, but they were loosened somewhat with a relaxing of the women’s residence hall hours and the allowance of shorts (Harrison, 1987.)
The period of 1959 through early 1963 was in some ways a relatively calm prelude to the major social unrest of the mid and later 1960s. President Kennedy’s assassination in the minds of many seemed to mark a beginning point for the tumultuous 1960s. Dr. King, Malcom X, Robert Kennedy and their subsequent assassinations, Civil Rights marches, Woodstock, Viet Nam, feminism, the space race were but a few of the many events that changed the American social fabric from 1963-1970.

Sue raised a daughter and worked inside and outside the home over the years as an active community leader. She spearheaded numerous nonprofit projects for a variety of civic organizations in both Warren and Logan Counties. In 1997 when her daughter divorced and returned to teaching full time, Sue stepped in to help care for her 1-year-old granddaughter.

She is not bitter about the collegiate and professional opportunities she was denied, seeming to accept the institutionalized sexism her generation endured as the “way things were.” Sue champions the value of a college education for all Americans,

I think everyone needs to go to college. It simply broadens you to know what is out there. You take all the introductory courses and it makes you appreciate that major. Even though you realize I just got an introduction to it. OK someone says, ‘I am a psychologist.’ You know what that is and you kind of know what they have been through to obtain the credentials to do that . . .You realize you only know your field. You realize how little you do know as opposed to some people who do not go to college who think they know it all.
As the daughter of two Depression era Kentuckians, you went to college to become a teacher so you’d have an income. It was just understood, we (Sue and her two sisters) were all to be teachers (S. Spurlock, personal communication, January 26, 2014).

Reflecting upon Margie Helm’s 1959 line, “Could the girls be counseled . . .” to the modern observer, it seems the freshmen females of 1959 could have been effectively counseled about many things. If one could time travel, one would like to have counseled them about banning together to reject the sexist roles and restrictions placed on them by both a chauvinist society and institution.

Women of Sue’s generation were pleased to have had the college experience, but it was not the college experience they wanted or deserved. One wonders at the enormous sacrificed academic talent from entire generations, who were not allowed to pursue their natural strengths but were instead shuttled into fields deemed suitable for females. The societal and familial pressures they faced were enormous. Furthermore, we have not escaped the effects of the pervasive collegiate sexism that women now in their 70s faced as teenagers. Issues of gender and inequality have certainly not been resolved on Western’s campus, or at other American colleges and universities.

Women have more choices when it comes to their collegiate lives and freedom, but a look at current headlines provides evidence that women in many ways are still relegated to various forms of second class citizenry in American higher education. Fifty five colleges are currently under investigation by the US Department of Education over their mismanagement of sexual harassment and violence complaints. Women have made significant inroads to the “male” fields of academic sciences and engineering, but many studies chronicle the issues still being faced by
females attempting to advance in these male dominated fields. While women are increasingly making up more of the general tenured faculty population, females are woefully absent from the administrative power structures in American universities.

Perhaps females yet to be born would “counsel the girls . . .” of today to continue banning together to reject the sexist roles and restrictions placed on us both by society and institutions of higher education.
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Sue Williams Spurlock on the right on the steps of the KY Building on Western’s campus. According to the Western dress code, the librarians could have refused her service due to her inappropriate attire - Capri pants.

Sue Williams Spurlock on the left wearing Bermuda shorts. Sue was waiting to catch a bus from Van Meter back to Russellville.
Sue Williams Spurlock and date at Western Kentucky State College Pi Sig Spring Formal 1961
Sue Williams Spurlock, front row-far right, Pi Sigma Upsilon Sorority 1960

Western Kentucky State College

John Howard Spurlock, BA from West Virginia University 1962

Long distance college boyfriend of Sue Williams Spurlock
JFK speaking in front of Bowling Green City Hall as part of a campaign rally October 8, 1960

JFK in motorcade in front of Presbyterian Church downtown Bowling Green, KY
October 8, 1960. Thousands of locals, including many Western students attended the rally.
From left to right the “Williams girls” Tina, Sue, and Mary June 30, 1962