Women, Education and Leadership at Rutgers
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Interviewee: Catharine Stimpson (CS)
Interviewer: June Cross (JC)

CS: Rutgers is a fabulous story in terms of women's higher education and in terms of higher education. It is of course a public university and was a model for women’s advancement in public education, especially when some of the private universities were being just a little bit stodgy. And it was important in a variety of ways. One is how it educated the women of New Jersey and the region. Secondly, it was through Douglass College. It had a women’s college that was a creative center of leadership and education. And then third, it was one of the very earliest women's studies programs and it had this group of unbelievably talented, innovative, bold and courageous women scholars and men at Rutgers who had the wherewithal to support them. My name is Catharine Stimpson but I’m often called Cate in polite company. I went through Rutgers as a Professor of English. Then I became Director of the Institute for Research on Women. And then I was named Acting Dean of the Graduate School. And then I was named permanent Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Graduate Education. Rutgers was very good to me.

The women’s the women's colleges consisted as a private women's colleges, some of them became quite radical. Forgive me for saying that but some of the women's Catholic women's colleges became quite radical. So they were the private women's colleges and then, they were the public women's colleges. And within larger institutions. And they provided a space for women that was important way beyond their size.

Why is education, public education for women is as important as private education for women. The great thing, the great strength about higher education in the United States is that it has both a public and a private system. So it has a Princeton and a Rutgers. It has a Columbia, and it has a City University of New York. These two systems compete, these two systems overlap, but because we have two systems, one public, and one private, we can't have the state controlling everything. And on the other hand, we can't have the market controlling everything. It gives freedom and flexibility to have both systems. And Rutgers and because of, and Douglass took very seriously the job of providing an accessible public education to the citizens of a state. It had a real civic mission and that can never be underestimated, to have a self-conscious civic mission.

I came to Rutgers in 1980. I'd been at a private women's college, Barnard College which was part of Columbia. But I'd also been to a women's college. And I was a great believer in what women's colleges give to women in terms of support, access, possibility and leadership roles. Now when I came in 1980, the process of consolidating the colleges was being talked about. So I was there, first it were the last days of Douglass, but I had known people at Douglass for years and I saw what they were doing there. Especially in terms of women’s studies. And the history of women studies in the United States has a major chapter because of the women who were at Douglass and at Rutgers University in general. Just they were so Mary Hartman, a leading women's historian, Elaine Showalter a leading feminist critic, Ruth Mandel who helped create the field of women in politics and these are only three names out of scores and scores of names. It was, it was a period of originality and dedication to scholarship and to change. Creating spaces. What the women did at Rutgers was creating spaces for mind, and spaces for the soul and spaces for ambition. And they’re also joined women like Linda Stamato who might not have of, who were active in the civic life of the state and provided important political support.
I think Douglass was scrappy, and scrappy and gutsy and gritty. It didn't have airs. It wasn't pretentious and what the Douglass I saw gave its students, gave its faculty the sense, this is your state. This is your life. Go live your life. A lot of people... may have come out of more traditional homes. A lot of Douglass people were not born with silver spoons in their mouths. So they went on to create a golden future with the encouragement that their education gave them.

CS: I was English [Department] at Douglass. I was hired into Douglass and my offices were in Douglass and my initial loyalty was to Douglass but changes were, changes were happening. And then when I became an administrator, a Graduate Dean, I was responsible for the campus. But it also, what was so important is at that point, the whole university was consumed with ambition. It had a president named Edward J. Bloustein who was a philosopher and a lawyer. It had a provost named Alec Pond who was a physicist. Then, there was a man named Kenneth Wheeler who was a historian from Texas who had far horizons in his eyes. And what was important about these men is they were supportive of women.

What was also important about them is they were ambitious for the university and this university was going to become a part of the most, the elite group of American universities, the American Association of Universities, and we were going to get there no matter what. But their strategy was to encourage intellectual innovation and less bold, and less courageous leaders would've said, "Don't do women's studies, it's too radical. Let's stick with the tried and true. Let's do our metrics with the tried and true," and this group said, "Wherever we can create excellence, we will create excellence."

So, when, when you want to create an educational excellence, you can go in several directions. You can take existing fields, American history, and you say, okay, we're going to hire the best American historians we can find. Or you can say, okay, we're going to do chemistry so we'll find the best organic chemist we can find. You can say that. But you can go onto say, we're going to do something else as well. We're going to find the best historian of women we can find. Or, in chemistry, we're going to put it together and have a program in oceanography. We're going to work in interdisciplinary fashion, so you take traditional fields and then you combine them in nontraditional ways.

JC: You create breadth.

CS: You create breadth, you create new horizons. You create you create a new way of looking at the subject, or you support a new way of looking at the subject. So you just don't look at the civil war, you look at women in the civil war. You look at women of all races in the civil war.

I had been at Barnard, which was a part of Columbia University. So, I was accustomed to having the women's colleges often treated with less love and respect than they deserved. So, I was familiar with the misogyny of higher education. Both the misogyny of contempt and the misogyny of condescension. And so what? And you jump over the mud puddles [laughter].

There was a huge debate about merging the faculties and it came from a variety of sources. But one thing that was very painful at Douglass was the sense that women were going to lose their place, and that Douglass's aspirations to education women and Douglass's aspirations to educate women leaders were just going to be thrown into a big blender. I don't think that's happened but at the time, it was a legitimate fear, because Douglass had enormous loyalty to it and well deserved loyalty. So, I was not really a part of the debate. I came a little bit too late. But it was, you couldn't miss the pain. You couldn't miss the pain that was involved in the debate.

When we have genuine racial equality, we can perhaps look differently at the historically black colleges and universities. But the historically black colleges and universities play a role that no other college and university does now, in terms of education of African Americans as the tribal colleges do in the education of indigenous Americans. There is, we're not equal yet and we don't understand each other yet and we don't understand the need to have a place that you can call home. You don't want to stay only in your home. But a place you can call home for which you can enter the larger world.
Right, and black feminists have written about when you need to establish coalitions and you establish coalitions when you have a home ... When you have a door you can open and say, "You may come in if you wish," but you issue the invitation.

The black women faculty were also and are also so strong. I mean, Cheryl Wall back then was criticism, Deborah [Gray] White in African American women's history, it really was a fort, then, Martha Holds who was writing about the relations, interracial, interracial relations and it is, was, and is a formidable faculty. And Professor Bloustein and Alec Pond, Kenneth Wheeler built the faculty with enormous courage and enormous intellectual taste.

Well, you may not care but it is a marker of achievement because you don't get in unless you meet certain metrics, a certain amount of research money, or certain amount of library books. You can be very good without belonging but if you belong, it is a sign of intellectual achievement. And I remember the day when the leadership of Rutgers learned that they'd been asked to join the AAU. Because some institutions have a sense of inferiority, a sense of being looked down upon is occasionally the state of New Jersey, feels that it's looked down upon and this group of men and women said, "Nobody looks down on us." So there was a bravado about it. But a bravado based on real accomplishments.

The deep question always is, how does intellectual change happen? How is there a change in ideas, especially if the institutions have knowledge, like faculties are controlled by one set of ideas and maybe even one set of people. Now, if you look at that situation, you've got one of two choices. You can just lay down and cry or go silent, or you can say, I'm setting up alternative institutions. And that's what women have done again and again. You don't want me in your club? Your mistake.

As I understand the Berkshire Conference, it was a group of women historians, some of them in women's colleges, they weren't, didn't call themselves women historians. They were historians who were women. And they met in the Berkshire mountains. And as I understand it, this is kind of an academic myth. They went walking together and hiking together and they talked about history. And it was a place where historians, who were women, could be free and could think. Some of them had faculty jobs, but they weren't easy to get. Then, after the Second World War, the Berkshire conference was perhaps less active than it might have been. This is the way I was taught the myth.

And a group of women including Douglas women said, "Let's have Berkshire, let's reanimate the Berkshire historians and let's have conferences." So there were conferences, not just to historians who were women, but about women's history.

I remember speaking at one in the seventies. Enormous excitement. Enormous excitement because what had been on the margins was really the center of adventures inquiry. And this was happening of course as creation of alternative institutions, had happened with some of the convents in the Catholic church or the churches. It happened in the arts, it happened with the women's colleges. It happened with the historically black colleges. The 19th century was a time of creation of alternative institutions for groups that were not accepted in the mainstream institutions.

Did you mean the 19th century?

It is the 19th century. The 19th century and the 1970s was another period of creation of alternative institutions. Women's history, feminist criticism, and then, fight your way in because your ideas are good. I hate to say it so simply but because you're right.

I was asked to come bring it back and we organized the conference on women in work and it was fun to do, but then I was asked to be acting dean of the graduate school. And I remember... the wonderful Kenneth Wheeler saying to me, "Catharine," in his Texas accent, "Catharine, you'd have to admit in only in a place like Rutgers where we'd appoint someone like you as acting dean of the Graduate School." [laughter] Because I was, because I came out of women's studies and I was known as a bit of
a maverick. [laughter] And they also, they were also making some other appointments like that to which he eluded. They took chances, they, in a deeper sense of the word, they had fun.

JC: Wow, that’s great.

CS: And they were, they were good about women.

JC: Ruth Mandel tells a wonderful story about you ... The, well, there was a group of you. I don't know who was in the group. Maybe, you could tell me. Meeting in a home, Robert Frost's home?

CS: Oh I know which one. No, we did a variety of things, but the institute for Research on Women had a little budget. And we organized a meeting of feminist and political leaders and we had the help of a very smart woman, now dead, named Francis Lear. And she was then married to Norman Lear and they had bought Robert Frost's old home and had made a show piece out of it. It was hardly the homespun place [laughter]. The homespun place of Robert Frost, very sophisticated but homespun poetry. No, we went up there and there are many stories, some of which are not to be repeated that came out of that meeting. I'm not sure exactly what the meeting accomplished.

In anything having to do with women in politics and any stories about women in politics, including how did Geraldine Ferraro get proposed as the first woman vice president, I bow to the authority of Ruth Mandel, one of the leaders about women in politics. Many ideas were hatched there and if Ruth Mandel says that’s when the idea was hatched because it did bring together academics and women political leaders. If Ruth Mandel says that's an idea that came out of the deliberations in Vermont, then it happened.

The Center for American Women in Politics was really a first. It was really a first to collect, to collect data as seriously as it did and to service advocacy for women in politics and to do training for women in politics. So, it was, it was scholarly but it was pragmatic. This is how you run for office, and this is why you should run for office. It was nonpartisan which was also important. But the Center for American Women and Politics operated on the perfectly respectable theory, indeed a noble theory that if you’re a democracy, you exclude no citizen. But if you’re democracy, you also have to train citizens. Nobody is born as citizen. We become citizens and we have to learn how to be citizens from the time we're tiny children. And then we have to learn how to run for office. And then we have to learn how to conduct ourselves in office. So it was a great creation and it was a part, it was one of those things that made Douglass and Rutgers so important in terms of creating national and then, with Mary Hartman's leadership, global institutions.

Mary Hartman is so amusing. She’s one of the smartest women around. She has a wicked sense of humor, wicked, wicked sense of humor and she can, can she can see around corners that we don't even know are corners. Mart Hartman's first book was about women who murder, which shows her, should be say taste for the offbeat subject. But what Mary Hartman did in addition to being a central creator of contemporary women's history. Mary Hartman saw the importance not only of thinking about women leaders nationally, but about thinking about women leaders globally, and that we do exist in a global world.

CS: So among the things she did was to recruit the great activist Charlotte Bunch and to bring in faculty of that caliber, but it was she who, among others, I mean everybody was in it together. But it was Mary, not only because of her groundbreaking scholarship but Mary said, "We can be a center for training women leaders nationally and globally." And Mary had and has, like so many of the women at Rutgers at [that] point, like Ruth Mandel, Mary and others, many others had the capacity to take an idea and turn it into a program, to say, "Gee, I," no, to say, "Women are leaders all around the world," and then to say, "Well, let's have an Institute for Women's Leadership, a global leadership." It was that kind of practical imagination that characterized her. That's why I say, this devastating sense of humor. But she was also always diplomatic. The, Douglass women behaved like, you know, there was a there could be in those days that you behaved like a lady. A lady in the best sense of the word, that you did not, you wanted to shake people up so you didn't make yourself an easy target. She had, she had
very, she had very innovative ideas but she was also a great persuader and persistent. And very, a
good speaker, a good public speaker, a good reiteration.

Alison, when Alison left Ford ... When the wonderful Alison left Ford, and there was a question of
what would she do next? Alison then spent a year at Spelman College which was enormously
important to her because she was devoted to women’s education and African American education
and the generally education for what we in America call minorities. And I remember she would write
about walking around the campus in early morning and seeing the dew on the trees and how happy
she was in her classes and how much she was learning by being at Spelman College. And then the
question of what next?
And, like others, I strongly encouraged her to go to Rutgers because in her, she loved public
education. She believed in public education. So that Rutgers gave her the chance to return to public
education, it gave her the chance to focus on women’s issues and it recognized her scholarship and
gave her tenure as a historian. So that, for Alison, it was a, a triple gratification to be able to go down
and do this. And Rutgers was so wise to hire her. It was a brilliant hire, and a choice that made Alison
very happy.
... It is an agony for us all that Alison had so short a time at Rutgers. I think there will probably be
several legacies. One great legacy will be the memory she leaves in students, and faculty, and
administrators. A memory of energy and brilliance and possibility. A memory of a woman of force and
principle. A second thing would be the book series she started on women’s leadership. A third legacy
that Alison will leave will be of course the Gloria Steinem Chair, where she put her heart into raising
money for a chair named for Gloria Steinem Feminist Studies in the Media at a public university. So
that will be a legacy. Another legacy will be what her friends and supporters will do for her which is to
support the Alison Bernstein mentoring program.

I watch with interest what the future of Rutgers University will be. In the short term, it will depend on
how well the merger goes with the medical school. That’s the immediate problem. In the short term,
it will also depend if they put athletics in the proper proportion. Even more deeply is whether the
state of New Jersey will support it. And this is a problem of all the major state universities which is the
drastic and to me, self-destructive cut back of state funding of the great public universities. So there
are those three issues that the university as a whole has to face.
It is a characteristic, well big institutions have to make choices and the strategic choice is will they
have lots of interesting centers that work on the ground, parts that work on the ground? Or will they
try to bring everything together into tightly run structures? And I don't know what choice Rutgers is
going to make. I mean, there's a happy medium between being the beneficiary of [inaudible 00:36:56]
energy, and energy on the ground and having certain standard procedures and protocols that
everybody has to follow. There’s a happy medium.

CS: I would hope that Rutgers would be wise enough to choose that happy medium and recognize all kind
of energies that can come out of the activities in the space that we now call Douglass. As they
recognize some of the ... some of the scientific centers, what are their energies? Enjoy them. See what
comes out of it. But it’s also important for Rutgers to remember that it is been a pioneer in the study
of women in gender. And it must not do anything to amputate itself from that history but rather build
on that history. Rather than trying to squelch it in the name of bureaucratic tidiness.
I am often asked about what’s going to happen to public institutions in the United States. And I think
it’s an open question. We’re going through a moment where public education is seen as a private
good rather than as a public benefit. And some of our greatest institutions have become less and less
dependent on state funding. I think of Michigan, I think of Virginia, I think of Texas, I think of Berkeley
in the California system. Now the state can still say you're our institution but they can say yeah but you only give me 9 percent of our budget. If you're in the position of a state institution, what do you do? You keep in touch with your alumni, you teach your students, especially your undergraduates as well as possible, you point to a record of discovery that the institution has made, you point to an even larger record of service that you have given to the state, that the institution has given to the state. Maybe athletics is going to be your tool. Then you better have good teams. You might point to athletics instead. And you also remember that not many of the state legislatures are proud of the institution. And so you cultivate the better angels of their nature.

I'm a great believer in women's sports. And indeed, to everyone's, to people's surprise, I've spoken about them and I have an essay up there somewhere in the internet about women in sports. I played basketball in college, until I blew out my knee and there by ending a noble career in women's basketball. Sports are a great developer of character. And they do teach team work, unless you've got a brutal coach. And it's also I think really good for little girls, to see those women going out there as a team, fighting, sometimes losing, sometimes winning. So, bravo to Rutgers for supporting women's basketball.

Now, this is off the record. Lawrence made a couple of racist remarks and so he had to build up he had to, he didn't build up women's basketball out of the, out of his, the goodness of his heart or his devotion to equality as Bloustein and I mean, Bloustein and Pond. And we learned that crew really, you know, that might have not been raging feminists but Bloustein had a very tough wife and they were very tough professional lawyers I believe. If I remember correctly. So they believed it. I don't think Lawrence believed it for a minute but you know, he was in trouble. Well, I think there are a variety of ways in which women can find leadership opportunities, a sense of team work and a sense of this is a space in which I can form my character. Sports is certainly one way of doing that. Unless they have a brutal of a coach. Now, Pat Summit didn't I believe the great the great coach from Tennessee. I believe all her team graduated. The team at Connecticut. The interesting thing about women's sports is how do they handle the question of [gasps] is this a hot bed of lesbianism. And so, I always look at the women's sports teams to see if they say, "Well, some of us are gay, some of us are straight," or if, if they ultimately go the Billie Jean King route or whether they hide this, and under a guise of muscular heteronormativity.

CS: But, in principle, women's sports are not only a signal of the university, they're really good for developing your character unless you have a brutal of a coach. And they are also a wonderful way, as sports can be, and if athletics scholarships are done properly, they're a wonderful way of getting your education. It's like the military in that respect. How many people go to West Point, Annapolis to get their education ... In sports are another way of getting your education if you're educated at the same time. If you're treated just like a body, you're being exploited. But if you're educated at the same time. I have a niece who's a brilliant skier. I hope she gets an athletic scholarship at a liberal arts college.

I remember several of my classes and I remember hearing one young man say, I was teaching, I was teaching modern literature. And I remember one young man saying when I was teaching William Burroughs, "It's bad enough she makes me read these books and then she's going to test me on them," and ... I would occasionally look down at the young man and they would just be rigid because I was the professor. But I was saying things they didn't think a woman should say. So you would run into a kind of provincialism. On the other hand, you would meet people who were just yearning to break out, just yearning to break out. But one of my strongest, strongest memory was how hard they worked and the jobs they had. And I was teaching a class on ... in which papers we do on a Monday, and a young woman came
in and said, "I can't get the papers in on Monday because I work in a nursing home over the weekend and I am hoisting bodies," and she wasn't big, "And I'm hoisting these bodies," and she said, "By the time I get home, I'm just exhausted." So I had kids who worked as roofers and they were, oh, I heard many many stories about waitressing and waitressing on the Jersey Shore.

These were not privileged kids. They were middle class, working class kids, some are the first in their families to go to college. And this was even before the crisis of student debt hit. And they just worked. They worked very hard. And they educated me ... because of, you know their stories about waitressing on the Jersey Shore. Their stories about the two jobs they did as well as study. And then I got really mad at the state of New Jersey because these are their kids. And I saw the condition of some buildings and you know, the state could've put a little bit more money into architecture.

Some of the buildings are lovely and some of the programs are wonderful. But the state could've had a bit more pride in some of its architecture, 'cause architecture is ... I wanted my kids to have a space for learning that gave them an aesthetic quality and a sense of possibility. And a sense of their own horizons being expanded. So that I didn't teach undergraduates for so long but I came away with enormous respect for their energy and their toughness and their grit.

JC: [What about the graduate students?]
CS: Some of them have gone onto very distinguished careers. Very, and they were wonderfully funny and ... who, I think there were so many people in Joan Burstein in education and [inaudible] in film studies. There were just a lot of, you know, I hate to give names because there's so many. this is what was important about one of the things that was important about Rutgers going into the AAU, is it gave, for better or for worse, rightly or wrongly, it gave a greater cache to the graduate school and to graduate education. This was now one of the leading research universities. And that's what counts toward graduate education is, is the quality, your quality as a research university. So, it was, it was really good for the graduate students that Rutgers achieved that marker... some of them, I remember them, I'm still in touch with some of the graduate students and some of them have had really wonderful, wonderful careers. Evelyn Wise, the filmmaker, has a PhD from Rutgers. Marilee Lindemann and Martha Nell Smith down at Maryland and Martha Nell Smith was set at one of the first centers for the humanities and technology, has her PhD from Rutgers. Peggy Phelan, a leader in performance studies has her PhD from Rutgers so they're, they, very, a very interesting smart group of graduate students who went on.

There's a famous study done by Matina Horner who went on to be president of Radcliffe. And she was known as a young scientist for her studies about fear of success. Why did women fear success? And one of the things they learned, they're within seven women's colleges. They were called the seven sisters. I now call them the seven hermaphrodites.

JC: Seven what? Because Harvard and Radcliffe and ...
CS: Hermaphrodites because Vassar admits men. And Harvard and Radcliffe became one school now. The board scores and the high school GPAs of applicants to the seven sisters were highest for Radcliffe. And then when you look ten years out, the achievements of the graduates were among the lowest for Radcliffe. It's something that happened in the Harvard atmosphere that didn't happen in the atmosphere of Bryn Mawr, Vassar, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Wellesley.

And there were a wide variety including the Catholic women's colleges. Now, Alverno, a Catholic women's college in Milwaukee, put together some of the most important programs we have for women of different ages and for working class women. But I can look at the map of the United States and I can just point this to you. There was, there was Mills in California, Chatham in Pittsburgh, Rollins, and Mary Washington in Virginia I think Lynchburg was at one point a women's college.
I could have that wrong. There was Pembroke at Brown that is now, Pembroke's relationship to Brown then became more like the relationship with Douglass to Rutgers, and it's now a library and a study center. So Newcomb at Tulane, again did that that funny trick. But in Virginia, the college that did Greek plays and photographs of the Greek plays and Greek, Randolph Macon. So there's a whole another cluster of smaller ones all around the country.

Um, I, I don't think it would fair to use Douglass as the canary in the mind. Because of the great variety in American institutions of higher education. You could also say as so goes Alverno which is a pioneering Catholic college for working class women and women of all ages in Wisconsin. So you can say that about Alverno. You can say of Mills college in California. Or you could say what happens to women in coeducational research universities? Or you could say, what happens to women at West Point? This is 4500 institutions of higher education in the United States. There are a lot of mines, there's gold mines and there's coal mines and there's silver mines and there are platinum mines and so what is the canary in each of these different kinds of mines? To me, the great question about Rutgers now is will it get respect and support from the state? Can it continue to be a great state institution? And then, will the humanities, because there's very strong humanities departments, will the humanities be respected? It is the greatest higher education system in the world at this point. Is it going to be squandered? Open question.