

Taking on the B-School boys club

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Interest in business programs is growing at women's colleges, and a second one recently won AACSB accreditation. More are expected to follow.

When Deborah Merrill-Sands became dean of Simmons College's School of Management in 2004, she quickly got to work on the school's effort to become accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Obtaining accreditation was a crucial step for the women's college, which competes with several other accredited business schools in the crowded Boston education market. She wanted to counteract any perception that the school didn't offer as rigorous a curriculum as its coed neighbors. "I was concerned that some people may perceive it as a soft MBA or an MBA-lite and imbue it with certain gender stereotypes," she says. "By having the accreditation, that question is off the table."

Merrill-Sands' efforts have paid off. Simmons made history last year, becoming the first women's college in the world to receive AACSB accreditation, viewed by many in the management education world as the gold standard for B-school approval. Since the accreditation, enrollment in the school's MBA program has increased 20%, Simmons says. In January, another women's college, Meredith College in Raleigh, N.C., earned AACSB accreditation. Simmons and Meredith have entered an elite pool; just under 5%, or 579 of the 12,000 business schools worldwide, hold AACSB accreditation. One other women's college is planning to seek accreditation, according to Simmons. It declined to identify the school, which it is advising.

Simmons and Meredith are at the forefront of a movement within the women's college community to broaden their academic offerings. In recent years, many such colleges have started to expand their mission beyond the liberal arts and now offer degree programs in areas like business, engineering, and medicine. For example, Smith College recently became the first women's college to add an engineering track, while two others are adding pharmacology programs, according to the Women's College Coalition, an association in Hartford, Conn., that represents more than 50 women's colleges in the U.S. and Canada. "I think women's colleges, like all other colleges and universities, are looking very closely at a number of market-driven variables and making sure that their programs are reflecting the needs of what today's students are looking for," says Susan E. Lennon, executive director of the Women's College Coalition.

Growing Field

Business is one of the more rapidly growing fields at women's colleges. Currently 44 such schools offer a business management curriculum, according to the AACSB. John Fernandes, president of the accrediting body, says he expects that more of those to seek accreditation as demand from undergraduate and graduate students for business offerings continues to increase. Women make up a slowly growing portion of students in MBA programs overall, comprising 37.5% of all the student population at AACSB U.S. member business schools in 2009, up from 36.2% five years before. Meanwhile, at the undergraduate level, interest in business among women overall appears to be waning, with women making up 42.8% of the student population studying business at AACSB U.S. member schools, down from 44.7% five years earlier, according to AACSB.

"There is an increasing interest among women in business at these predominantly liberal arts schools," Fernandes says. "More women are looking at business careers, and certainly a business curriculum has become more of a necessity than it was 10 or 20 years ago."

Many women's college presidents are taking their mission to provide students with a top-quality business education more seriously. At Meredith, President Maureen Hartford says obtaining accreditation was a top priority when she arrived at the school 11 years ago. The school has had an MBA program for 25 years, but Hartford worried it was losing ground in the marketplace. Many of the college's neighboring schools, such as Duke University's Fuqua School of Business (Fuqua Full-Time MBA Profile), University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's Kenan-Flagler Business School (Kenan-Flagler Full-Time MBA Profile), and North Carolina State University's Jenkins Graduate School of Management (Jenkins Full-Time MBA Profile), already had AACSB accreditation, leaving Meredith at a disadvantage. "I felt that in order to be competitive here, we needed to ramp up our program," she says.

The faculty spent the last 10 years preparing for the rigorous accreditation process, undergoing an intensive curriculum review on both the graduate and undergraduate levels and identifying gaps. In recent years, Meredith added courses in business law, operations management, and international business and hired more professors with strong research credentials. The school's emphasis on revamping the program has gone over well with students; business is one of the three most popular majors at the college, with 170 undergraduates enrolled in the business school. There are also 85 enrolled in the school's MBA program, which is about 70% female and 30% male.

Confidence Boost

While the quality and rigor of the business programs at Meredith is comparable to that of other coeducational institutions, there are subtle elements of the curriculum that set it apart, faculty say. For example, students in the school's organization behavior class are required to write a paper about a female business leader and her career path, says Susan Wessels, the business school's department head and professor of accounting. Women executives frequently visit the school, and students organize a business fashion show every year. But perhaps most important, the all-female environment helps boost students' confidence, she says. "Lots of studies show when men are present in the classroom, women defer to them or aren't as confident in responding," Wessels says. "When you have a class of all females, you can't say: 'I'll let men answer the question.' Women at Meredith are confident and willing to speak up and test their ideas."

At Simmons College, the school makes a similar effort to help women understand how gender differences play out in the workplace. Students discuss case studies written by professors that highlight women in executive positions, professors conduct research on gender dynamics, and the school offers a popular elective called Gender and Leadership as well as a required class on negotiation, both of which help students hone skills for salary and promotion discussions. "If women being trained in an MBA program understand how gender plays out and how it shapes their opportunities, they are able to manage these dynamics strategically in a way they're not able to if they're oblivious or if they think the world is gender blind or neutral," says Merrill-Sands, the Simmons dean.

Indeed, some studies suggest that women's schools may do a better job than coed institutions in preparing students to enter the business world. A 2008 study of women's college alumnae from classes of 1970 to 1997, commissioned by the Women's College Coalition, showed that women's college graduates were more effective than their counterparts at coed liberal arts colleges and public universities in areas such as leadership and communications, job preparedness, and career advancement. For example, 48% of women's college graduates said their schools were effective in helping them learn to be leaders, vs. 30% of liberal collage alumnae and 19% of public universities' alumnae. Another study, published in the Journal of College Student Development in 2007, compared the experiences of women attending

women's colleges with those attending coeducational institutions and found that women enrolled at single-sex schools were more engaged in their classroom experiences. The authors also reported that students found they had "higher levels of feelings of support and greater gains in college," according to the article.

Attracting Talented Candidates

That's not to say that students who attend these schools study business in an all-female bubble. Students at Meredith are required to do internships off campus, many of the school's clubs plan events with neighboring coeducational schools, and students will sometimes sign up for classes at other institutions, faculty say. Brittany Morrison, 20, a junior at Meredith College, says she has done three internships, including one currently at an engineering company in Raleigh. At school, she's been able to hone her leadership skills, serving as a leader in students clubs and working on a research paper on female entrepreneurs in North Carolina. She feels that her experience at a woman's business school, coupled with the school's recent accreditation, will give her an advantage when she enters the job market. "Getting accreditation for the school was really important for the school, but even more important for the students," Morrison says. "It's a really tough economy, and having the accreditation will make us stand out to employers because sometimes people don't hear about smaller schools like us."

That opinion is shared by Elissa Ellis-Sangster, executive director of the Forté Foundation, a consortium of schools working to increase the number of women pursuing MBAs. Meredith and Simmons have made a smart strategic move in obtaining AACSB accreditation, because it will allow them to continue to attract talented women candidates who might otherwise consider only coeducational schools that already have accreditation, she says. "Business schools have generally upped the competition for attracting women, so that's another reason it's good for these schools to get accreditation so they can level the playing field in the choices these women have," Ellis-Sangster says. "It's also a very important step in terms of recruiter relations and what parents are looking for in terms of education, so I think having accreditation really steps up the game for them."

Taylor Porter, a first-year student in Simmon's MBA program and a former English teacher, says she only considered attending a business school with AACSB accreditation. Last spring she was choosing among Boston College's Carroll School of Management (Carroll Full-Time MBA Profile), Boston University School of Management (Boston University Full-Time MBA Profile), and Simmons, which had just received accreditation. She was skeptical at first about attending an all-women MBA program but soon warmed up to Simmons after visits to the classroom and talking with students and faculty. She says she was impressed by the school's intellectual energy and cutting-edge research on gender issues. "The conversations that happen in the classroom here are very intellectual, and there's not a lot of the social jockeying that you tend to see in a coed classroom or in an environment where there is sort of a male ethos to things," says Porter, who wants to get a job in the beer and wine industry. "I'm learning to take myself seriously as a business person. I am seen here as an intellectual, not just an intellectual woman."

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