

“Slow Down:” The Legacy of the G.I. Bill on Women’s Enrollment
Patterns, 1935-1955 – A Survey of Big Ten Universities

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Abstract

The G.I. Bill (or Veteran’s Readjustment Act of 1944) was, arguably, the single most dramatic event for colleges and universities in the twentieth century. The requirements of the bill, the numbers of veterans who participated, the changes for delivery of higher education, the impact on American cultural history are resounding testaments to the enormity of the impact of this single piece of legislation. Historians have well documented its effects on expectations for men in careers, business, lifestyles and resources.

This article will investigate the impact of the G.I. Bill on women’s enrollments and their consequent advancement in higher education between 1944 and 1955. Did the G.I. Bill’s open access for men stunt women’s enrollment? Does an analysis of distribution of enrollment trends illustrate shifts towards roadblocks for women students that resulted in closing the doors to higher education? How long did it take to reverse the trends established in 1945? Do the Big Ten universities, patterns represent a larger trend deserving additional investigation relative to the G.I. Bill’s impact on enrollment of women students?

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Keith Olsen has consistently argued “the bill ‘made America what it is’ by being true to the American dream, extending middle-class opportunities to hard workers...by promoting home ownership and suburbia...and education.”² Even when he admits that less than 3% of G.I. Bill benefits were assigned to women, he sees the benefits far outweighing the deficits. Ben Brodinsky states that the G.I. Bill was the number one educational event of the twentieth century. He maintains “congress enacted the G.I. Bill of Rights in 1944, with far-reaching and far-ranging results. Millions of young men and women, who served in the military, from elementary to postgraduate levels, were helped toward new career and professional goals. America’s educational institutions, too, were invigorated in the process.”³ Brodinsky places the G.I. Bill ahead of desegregation, handicapped act, standardized testing, federal support, information technology, and public high schools to name just a few in his list of educational impact.

Arguably, the G.I. Bill was good for higher education, in general. But did it, also put into place a series of administrative changes that affected the role and place of women in higher education for several subsequent decades? Does an evaluation of enrollment statistics tell the whole story or will individual stories be needed to examine this side of “the most important event” in

twentieth century educational history? Representative G.V. “Sonny” Montgomery (D-MS) wrote in observance of the G.I. Bill’s 50th anniversary, “the meaning and value of the G.I. Bill of Rights... established education – the knowledge society – as the hallmark of freedom and achievement...”⁷⁴

This paper will investigate the impact of the G.I. Bill on women’s enrollments and their consequent advancement in higher education between 1944 and 1955, specifically, and for years beyond. Did the G.I. Bill’s open access for men stunt women’s enrollment and presence in higher education? Does an analysis of distribution of enrollment trends illustrate shifts towards roadblocks for women students that resulted in closing the doors to higher education? What is the long-term impact of this shift for women in growth trends and educational opportunities, specifically in the sample survey? How long did it take to reverse the trends established in 1945? Do the Big Ten universities’ patterns represent a larger trend deserving additional investigation relative to the G.I. Bill’s impact on enrollment of women students?

Analyzing enrollment registration statistics from several Big Ten Universities for the years 1935, 1940, 1945, 1950 and 1955, will provide the raw data to determine if the G.I. Bill proved to be a deterrent to the advancement of women within the ranks of American higher education. Using this statistical example it will be possible to explore the impact, if any, of legislating benefits for returning male veterans in an era of increased female student participation.

Methodology

This paper is based on a review of enrollment statistics for 1935, 1940, 1945, 1950, and 1955 for certain Big Ten Universities. All twelve current Big Ten schools were solicited for enrollment statistics, six responded to a survey query: Northwestern University, Chicago, IL; Ohio State University, Columbus, Oh; Pennsylvania State College, State College, Pa.; University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mi.; and University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. The total enrollment

of these six schools in 1935 was 70,002 and by 1955 it had risen to 135,832. These numbers include both graduate and undergraduate figures where both were provided and represent a significant portion of the college population in the United States for those years (See Appendix B).

The trends identified in these schools will provide an illuminating snapshot of the effect of the G.I. Bill on the enrollment patterns of both men and women. Reginald Wilson argues in his National Forum article on the transformation of America,

To illustrate the profound impact of the G.I. Bill one needs only recite the stark statistics: (1937) two years before the war approximately 160,000 U.S. citizens were in college. By 1950, the figure had risen to nearly 500,000...Before the war, 10% of students attended college, and the G.I. Bill led to 51% of students being able to attend.⁵

The years were chosen to provide a bracket of distribution both before and after the G.I. Bill's passage in 1944. Significant enrollment numbers for women were noted in the decades before the 1930's. Phyllis Stock states in *Better than Rubies: A History of Women's Education* that "the early 20th century was a time of growth for American women's higher education...the number and percentage of women in colleges and universities increased through the century until World War II. In 1900, they received 17% of all advanced degrees; in 1910, 23%; in 1920, 34%; in 1930, 40%; in 1940, 41%."⁶

The parameters for the study are established with historical criteria in mind. The years 1935-1955 represents a twenty-year guidepost for this analysis of enrollment statistics. They were chosen to evaluate the argument made in *The New York Times* in 1946. The Times reported "returning veterans, who had priority in college admissions, were making it difficult for women to enter college at all."⁷

History

In 1962, K.C. Cirtautas wrote in *The American College Girl* that “higher education for women is at present highly valued in the United States, and indications are that its importance will increase from year to year...The foremost wish of the American girl is to enjoy life meaningfully and to partake of civilized prosperity.”⁸ If this statement were accurate, it represented a major philosophical and cultural shift between 1945 and 1962. Prior to the beginning of World War II, women had been making significant gains in the educational arena. Their numbers grew from 10-20% across the co-educational landscape to highs of 50-60% in some midwestern schools, for example, Northwestern University. With the return of World War II veterans and the implementation of the G.I. Bill, the enrollment numbers shifted against women for a twenty-year period of time that witnessed an equal amount of time to regain.

The G.I. Bill benefits contained four basic legislative components: 1) readjustment allowances while unemployed; 2) educational opportunity in colleges and universities; 3) vocational education and on-the-job training; and 4) loans for the purchase of a home, farm, or business.⁹ Representative G.V. “Sonny” Montgomery of Mississippi recounted during a presentation on behalf of the American Council on Education

With the stroke of a pen, President [Franklin] Roosevelt transformed the face and future of American Society. Higher Education, which had been a privilege of the fortunate few, became part of the American dream – available to all citizens who served their country through military service. No longer were the hopes and expectations of young Americans of modest economic means restricted because the key to advancement – higher education – was beyond their reach.¹⁰

The G.I. Bill began its legislative life in 1943 as an economic review by Congress of the impact of the returning veteran population once the war did conclude. The *Final Report of the Conference of Post-War Adjustment of Civilian and Military Personnel* stated “within the first year of the demobilization process there will exist

the likelihood, if not the certainty, of a large volume of unemployed, involving as many as 8 or 9 million.”¹¹ Having recently experienced the most significant economic depression in collective memory, the Roosevelt administration was unlikely to allow demobilization to occur without a financial package in hand.

The ‘Conference on Post-war Readjustment of Civilian and Military Personnel’ chaired by Dr. Floyd W. Reeves, a staff member of the American Council on Education and a professor on leave from the University of Chicago, was charged with making recommendations to the President. The Conference reported a two-part plan for the education and training of servicemen. “First, a general plan which offered twelve months of schooling at any level” designed specifically for retraining for occupations/vocations. “Second, a supplementary plan would provide an additional three years of education...administered under a competitive systems of scholarships...made available in proportion to the rate of demobilization.”¹²

Congressional consideration, and American Legion lobbying, lasted from November 1943 to June 1944. The Senate claimed just one woman member during the debates over the legislation: Hattie Wyatt Caraway (D-Arkansas) while the House of Representatives had six women: Mary Teresa Norton (D-New Jersey), Edith Nourse Rogers (R-Massachusetts), Jessie Sumner (R-Illinois), Margaret Chase Smith (R-Maine), Clare Booth Luce (R-Connecticut) and Winifred Claire Stanley (R-New York). Their voices were muted during the debate. It was the American Legion, however, that is credited with designing the main features of the G.I. Bill and pushing it through Congress. The Legion is credited with overcoming objections by other organizations that the proposed bill was too sweeping and could jeopardize veterans getting any help at all.

Roosevelt signed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill) on June 22, 1944. The National Resources Planning Board, a White House agency, had studied postwar manpower needs and in June 1943 recommended a series of programs for education and training. Although, many contemporary authors and recent historians agree with the 1947 assessment by then New York State Department

Education Director of Higher Education John S. Allen “when the G.I. Bill was made a law of the land it is probable that no one in his wildest flights of imagination anticipated that veterans would attend college in such numbers as has proved to be the case.”¹³

Few researchers have considered the potential negative impact for women in higher education. Specifically, the G.I. Bill stated, “veterans serving more than ninety days or discharged through service disability received benefits...those who served on active duty between September 1940 and July 1947 were eligible.” This represented an unparalleled federal subsidy for “college enrollment, which was neither means-tested nor ability-tested.”¹⁴ It also set in place a structure that was replicated after the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and other military engagements in recent American history.

The G.I. Bill required that “almost all colleges and universities modified their admission policies to admit by examination veterans who had not graduated from high school.” In addition, they recommended, “those with serious educational deficiencies be given the opportunity to complete high school on campus.” Most schools gave veterans preferences over non-veterans as well as credit for military training and experience. “Even women’s colleges, such as Vassar, Russell Sage, Finch and Sarah Lawrence admitted male veterans.” Institutions were guided by principles developed by the American Council on Education including criteria for experience guidelines.

The World War II G.I. Bill provided six benefits: education and training; loan guaranty for a home, farm, or business; unemployment pay of \$20 a week for up to 52 weeks; job-finding assistance; top priority for building materials for VA hospitals; and military review of dishonorable discharges. The first three of these benefits were administered by the Veterans Administration (VA). The VA paid the educational institution up to a maximum of \$500 a year for tuition, books, fees, and other training costs. The VA also paid the single veteran a subsistence allowance of up to \$50 a month. This was increased to \$65 a month in 1946 and to \$75 a month in 1948. Allowances for veterans with dependents were higher. This program ended July 25, 1956. In the peak year of 1947, veterans accounted for 49 percent of college enrollment.

Out of a veteran population of 15,440,000, some 7.8 million were trained at a total cost of \$14.5 billion.¹⁶

Educational use breakdown:

2,230,000 in college	3,480,000 in other schools
1,400,000 in on-job training	690,000 in farm training

By 1956 when the last student received his World War II G.I. Bill educational benefits, the Veterans Administration “counted 2,232,000 veterans who had attended colleges under the G.I. Bill” (2.9 percent were women). These numbers do not reflect the full measure of the educational impact. A more accurate number comes closer to eight million, “2.2 million in colleges, 3.5 million attended other schools such as business, trade, art or drama schools and, even, high schools. About 1.4 million were involved in on-the-job training and 690,000 in farm training.”¹⁷

No doubt about it, the G.I. bill had a major impact on education, physically and philosophically. Colleges and universities had to revise their curriculum, adjust to the first true class of adult students, and expand their facilities to accommodate the demand placed on the academy. The lack of concern for equity, either intrinsically or explicitly, reflects Abigail Adams oft-quoted statement “what about the women.”¹⁸ The G.I. Bill’s focus was the adjustment of servicemen (author’s emphasis). The intent of the legislation and the purpose of its drafters were to avoid post-war riots similar to those that occurred after World War I. The effect of this single piece of legislation was grossly underestimated in regard to the number of men who would, ultimately, enroll in colleges and universities. The effect it would have on the presence of women on college campuses was not even a consideration.

Ideology of the Family

Dorothy Schaffer commented on these trends in a report for the American Council on Education entitled “What comes of training women for war” written in 1948. She states “in spite of the fact that women can be taught to do what men can be taught to do, with allowances for physical differences...there will undoubtedly have to

be differences provided for teaching men and women in many cases because of the influence of contemporary cultural conditions.”¹⁹ Just what were these conditions? As the need for military servicemen expanded in the 1940s, women were recruited to work in factories and munitions plants in ever expanding numbers. At colleges and universities across the country, contractors like Curtiss Wright and Consolidated Vultee, trained women in military programs, mechanical engineering, and wartime production distribution. The end of the war signaled women would feel major societal changes due to their movement out of industry, business and colleges. The impact of these changes was disproportionately leveled on women who had acquired skills and training during the war years.

The ideology of the family is a historical construct that identifies specific family roles based on gender. Men are the providers (hunters/gatherers) and women are the caregivers (homemakers). These traditional roles can be abandoned for convenience sake or, as in World War II, for the national interest. But when peace prevails, traditional roles **MUST** be adhered. “For many women, access to education—whether in schools or outside them—signified the chance to discard traditional ideas about women’s place and replace them with more expansive concepts of female identity.”²⁰

The philosophical underpinning of the ideology of the family identifies the male as in need of both an occupation and occupational advancement. In the field of education, occupational advancement requirements would bar women from “traditionally male” domains of work. Shaffer continued in her ACE report, “social attitudes and employment prospects will continue to affect educational opportunities for women...what men and women want (Shaffer’s emphasis) women to do will continue to have heavy weight, and women are still disqualified in many areas as a result.”²¹

So as the end of the war became a reality, the “Rosie the Riveters” and “Sarah Students” were going to be sent back home in significant enough numbers to undermine progress made for years prior to these events. Or as Phyllis Stock stated “it was after the Second World War that the ideology of the family was to affect American women’s opportunities for education and professional

status.” Looking at the enrollment numbers for the Big Ten universities surveyed here, Stock was right.

Statistical Review

Undergraduates

The enrollment numbers for the six colleges reported here indicated that beginning in 1935 and continuing through 1945, women students made significant enrollment strides. These growth patterns were following a predictable upward trend observable since the passage of the Women’s Right to Vote amendment in 1920. Admissions directors would have been responsible planners to anticipate that this growth pattern would have continued beyond 1945. It did not. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask what factor(s) caused the drop off evident between 1945 and 1955 and beyond. Clearly, local issues may impact an individual college one year to the next. But clearly a more substantial and national trend is at work to impact the enrollment as significantly as these enrollment numbers show. The chart below summarizes totals for all six colleges included in this survey.

Undergraduate and Graduate Students Combined						
Year	Men	Percentage	Women	Percentage	%age Change	Total
1935	45931	65.61%	24071	34.39%		70002
1940	57222	67.46%	27595	32.54%	-1.85%	84817
1945	63736	56.59%	48878	43.41%	10.87%	112614
1950	84302	67.64%	40327	32.36%	-11.05%	124629
1955	94551	69.60%	41281	30.40%	-1.96%	135832

An analysis of each, individual college (See Appendix A) shows specific trends for both that school and its region. Beginning with the Pennsylvania State College, the statistics indicate that undergraduate enrollment of women as a proportion of total enrollment increased 26.24% between 1935 and 1945. Following the return of veterans, enrollment of women decreased 23.76% between 1945 and 1955. These numbers indicate substantial losses. In addition to forfeiting the previous years gain, there was an additional loss of 23.76%. The percentage of women in 1955 was less than 1% higher it was in 1935. At Penn State this trend is explicit on both graduate and undergraduate levels.²³

At the University of Michigan, the trend is similar, although the total numbers are significantly smaller. Between 1935 and 1945, women gained 10.43% of the available enrollment slots. Between 1945 and 1955, they lost 11.27% bringing the percentage of women to men at a virtual dead heat with its status in 1935. All gains were lost over the twenty-year review cycle.²⁴ The University of Illinois witnesses a similar pattern in its undergraduate enrollment.

Between 1935 and 1945, women gained 9.17% in enrollment numbers. While during the years 1945 and 1955, they lost 13.27%, a twenty-year loss of over 4 percentage points. At Illinois, women were less represented in 1955 than in 1935.²⁵ The numbers at Ohio State University replicate those delineated for the University of Illinois. Between 1935 and 1945, Ohio State undergraduate women gained 7.93%. Between 1945 and 1955, they lost 11.26%.²⁶

Meanwhile at Northwestern University in urban Chicago, the numbers are more dramatic. Between 1935 and 1945, women undergraduates represented 46% of all students and had gained 17.65% in enrollment. Between 1945 and 1955, they lost 14.46%. This represents a slight gain in twenty years of approximately 3 percentage points. Also significant to note, women represented over 63% of the undergraduate population in 1945 just prior to the end of the war.²⁷

The University of Minnesota numbers show much less significant gains between 1935 and 1945 but an equal percentage of losses between 1945 and 1955 resulting in a net loss of over 4 percentage points. Between 1935 and 1945, women gained slightly over 1% in enrollment. From 1945 to 1955, they lost 6.23% for an overall twenty-year drop of more than 4 percentage points.²⁸

A cumulative review of all six colleges/universities (see table above) reveals that between 1935 and 1945, undergraduate women gained more than 9% of the enrollment slots available at all six institutions. Between 1945 and 1955, they lost over 13% of the available enrollment slots, a shift of more than over 4 percentage points in the twenty-year period under review. Total gain for women between 1935 and 1945 is 42,612 or 64.74% over ten years. Comparatively, the loss between 1945 and 1955 was 23,218 or

35.20% of the total student populations of the surveyed colleges.

Graduate/Professional

The numbers on the graduate/professional are not markedly different from those reported for undergraduates, although responding colleges were. For graduate enrollments, there are only three samples to review: Penn State, Illinois and Northwestern. These numbers are enlightening in their own right.

At Penn State, between 1935 and 1945 women gained 6.51% in enrollment numbers. For the years 1945 and 1955, they lost almost 8%. In the twenty-year period of this study, there was a total loss of over 2.50% for women graduate slots.²⁹ At the University of Illinois, women gained more than 7% between 1935 and 1945. They then faced a loss of over 11.50% between 1945 and 1955. This represents a loss of over 4% (similar to the undergraduate rate) between 1935 and 1955.³⁰

Once again, Northwestern University provides an interesting case study of change. The numbers indicate that 1935 was a period of significant female graduate presence. Women represented more than 50% of all graduate/professional students. Between 1935 and 1950, women's presence dropped to a staggering 18% (author's emphasis). This represents an overall drop over more than 32 percentage points in fifteen years. Northwestern witnessed some gains for women between 1950 and 1955, but the overall twenty-year loss was over 24 percentage points. This combined with the dramatic drop at the undergraduate level indicates a major enrollment shift between 1945 and 1955.³¹

Conclusion

This paper attempted to investigate the impact of the G.I. Bill on women's enrollments and their consequent advancement in higher education between 1944 and 1955, specifically, and for years beyond. Utilizing enrollment data from six Big Ten universities for the periods 19135, 1940, 1945, 1950 and 1955, the rise and fall in total number and proportion of the student body was examined.

Did the G.I. Bill's open access for men stunt women's enrollment and presence in higher education? Based on the

enrollment patterns detailed herein, the G.I. Bill was extraordinarily detrimental to women's presence as both undergraduate and graduate students at these colleges and universities. Northwestern University's graduate student enrollment is, perhaps, the best (or worst) case study. In 1935, 50+% of all graduate students were women; by 1950, less than 18% were women. This downward shift is monumental. Does it illustrate roadblocks for women students that resulted in closing the doors to higher education? While additional research on socio-economic changes in the United States between 1945 and 1955 would have to be undertaken, it is clear that the number of women students were shrinking measurably. The minimalization of the presence of women serves as a disincentive for incoming women students as they have few, if any, role models or mentors to emulate in the classroom.

What is the long-term impact of this shift for women in growth trends and educational opportunities, specifically in the sample survey? How long did it take to reverse the trends established in 1945? The impact of the G.I. Bill was unsurpassed in the history of higher education. Over 15.6 million veterans were eligible for benefits by 1947. Over 7.8 million (more than 50%) received some degree of training or college education. The total cost was \$14.5 million dollars over eleven years of benefit distribution.³² But for women, enrollment numbers did not reach a peak similar to that witnessed in 1935 for another fifty years. In some disciplines, the enrollment numbers have never regained their 1935 status. It would be particularly interesting to this author to examine these same institutions enrollment patterns for specific majors to document the long-term effects on disciplines as well as institutions.

Do the Big Ten universities' patterns represent a larger trend deserving additional investigation relative to the G.I. Bill's impact on enrollment of women students? Definitely. While the six institutions reviewed in this paper represent over 100,000 individual students, a more comprehensive study including a wider regional scope and broader institutional types would be necessary to examine macro trends indicated by the adoption of the G.I. Bill. Michael Bennett in his seminal book *When Dreams Come True: The G.I. Bill and the Making of Modern America* argues

The G.I. Bill of Rights was the law that worked, the law paid for...and reaped dividends because it made the American dream come true for so many. It enabled millions of working-class people to make a middle-class way of life for themselves. It did it by giving them an educational grubstake and a homesteader's claim on the New Frontier..."

When evaluating the effect of the G.I. Bill on women, most authors look at the return of women to the home from the workplace. Often this return path is seen as beneficial and necessary. However, it is clear from a review of the preceding statistics that women were gravely affected in the classroom in 1945 and in the years that followed. Having made significant strides preceding 1935 and through 1945, women came to expect that higher education would be a door open to them. After 1945, it was effectively closed for a minimum of ten years but certainly not reopened to the extent it had been in 1935. After 1955, women would begin their climb up the academic ladder again, this time trying to regain the status they had accomplished back in 1935.

Further research is necessary to determine if the increases in marriage rate, birth rate, and postwar economy directly or indirectly affected college choice for women in relation to increases for men under the G.I. Bill. In institutions where specific administrative rules circumscribed attendance at college by women, what effect did these rules have in the short term (to 1950) and the long term (through 1970s). A University of Wisconsin Faculty Steering Committee on Post-war University Problems recommended in 1945 that "the university should permit a maximum of flexibility in such matters as entrance requirements, attainment examinations and substitution of courses or the earning of credit by examination..." Thirty years later in the late 1970's and early 1980's, these same practices would come under heavy critical fire when applied to minorities. Yet in 1945 no one seriously considered the impact on women students of these very influential changes to the higher educational environment, nor would they evaluate the long-term consequences for decades to come.

Endnotes

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APPENDIX A
Percentages of Enrollment by Gender: 1935 through 1955

TOTALS*

Undergraduate and Graduate Students Combined

Year	Men	Percentage	Women	Percentage	% Change	Total
1935	45931	65.61%	24071	34.39%		70002
1940	57222	67.46%	27595	32.54%	-1.85%	84817
1945	63736	56.59%	48878	43.41%	10.87%	112614
1950	84302	67.64%	40327	32.36%	-11.05%	124629
1955	94551	69.60%	41281	30.40%	-1.96%	135832

Penn State College/University
Undergraduate Students

Year	Men	Percentage	Women	Percentage	% Change	Total
1935	4613	81.58%	1001	18.42%		5654
1940	5731	77.49%	1664	22.51%	4.09%	7395
1945	3014	55.34%	2432	44.66%	22.15%	5446
1950	8751	77.68%	2513	22.32%	-22.34%	11264
1955	10638	79.08%	2934	20.92%	-1.42%	13452

Graduate Students

Year	Men	Percentage	Women	Percentage	% Change	Total
1935	242	78.31%	67	21.60%		300
1940	458	83.27%	92	16.73%	-4.87%	550
1945	277	72.89%	103	27.11%	10.38%	380
1950	1206	83.86%	232	16.14%	-10.97%	1438
1955	1172	80.93%	276	19.07%	2.93%	1448

APPENDIX B

Bachelor's and Doctoral Degrees Earned

Men = X

Women = Y

Bachelor's Degree

	1879	1899	1909	1929	1949	1969	1989
0-100000	XY	XY	XY	XY	Y		
100000-199999							
200000-299999							
300000-399999					X		
400000-499999						XY	X
500000-599999							Y
600000-699999							

Doctoral Degrees

	1879	1899	1909	1929	1949	1969	1989
0-5000	XY	XY	XY	XY	XY	Y	
5001-10000							
10001-15000							Y
15001-20000							
20001-25000						X	X
25001-30000							

SOURCE: *Statistical Handbook on Women in America*, 1996.

NOTE: By the 1989 year, women were exceeding men in earned bachelor's degrees and beginning to catch up in doctoral degrees.