“Perfecting Our Whole Nature”

Intellectual and Physical Education for Women in the Antebellum Era

Women pursued advanced education for many practical reasons. As important as these practical motives were in the increase of female education, they do not fully explain why so many women flocked to high schools, academies, seminaries, and the few colleges that admitted them. The thousands of women who saw teaching as a way to earn a living, and the somewhat smaller number who prepared for other possible remunerative occupations as well, such as bookkeeping, scribing, or writing for publication, were not the only women seeking higher education, nor were future vocations their only goals. Beliefs in evangelical Christianity inspired women to become more educated so that they could be better moral influences on their families and the world at large, while concomitant ideals of self-improvement also motivated women to seek out formal and informal sources of education. Women pursued advanced education, not only for practical purposes, but also because they and their parents in a fundamental way valued learning for its own sake. The idea of self-improvement through intellectual growth was an assertion of these women’s claim to their worth and independence in the Enlightenment, republican, and evangelical traditions.

In accounts of education in the antebellum era, historians have emphasized ideologies of intellectual difference between men and women. Those ideologies certainly existed. There were those who believed that men’s and women’s brains were not capable of the same feats, or that, even if they were, there still was no reason to educate men and women in similar ways.
Historians tell the stories of a handful of pioneers who challenged these beliefs, most notably Emma Willard, Catharine Beecher, and Mary Lyon. These women were indeed remarkable in many ways, and deserve recognition for a host of reasons, including the establishment of long-lasting institutions. A broader reading of primary documents suggests, however, that their beliefs about women’s intellectual capabilities were not anomalous. These women were part of a large group of educators and advocates who believed in intellectual equality, that the pure pleasure of learning should be enjoyed by all, and that women deserved unbounded access to advanced education as a source of delight. This chapter examines these common views of women’s intellectual capabilities, and their manifestations in the academic curricula available to women.

A second source of the conviction that education was intrinsically valuable to women was the common association of intellectual well-being with physical health. Educators and doctors filled journals with injunctions to exercise, and emphasized the importance of not building one’s brain to the exclusion of building one’s body. These directives applied to both males and females. Educators encouraged all young people to think of their bodies and minds as linked, and urged youth to develop both intellectually and physically. Like intellectual development, physical well-being served societal, religious, and individual ends. This chapter addresses the academic curricula as well as the availability of physical education in high schools, academies, and seminaries in the 1820s and 1830s.

“Equals as Well as Friends”: Male and Female Intellectual Capabilities

In a eulogy for Joseph Emerson, an early advocate of female education, an anonymous memorialist wrote that Emerson sought to “do away with the assumption that women were never designed to be literary or scientific.” He “treated men and women essentially in the same manner, without any needless distinction,” and he regarded women “as equals as well as friends.” Speaking in the same spirit as the advocates of companionate marriage in the previous decades, Emerson was not alone in his beliefs or in his work on behalf of female education.

Authors of numerous essays and addresses throughout the 1820s and 1830s asserted that women’s intellectual capacities were similar to that of men’s. For instance, the anonymous author of an 1826 article on women’s education began by stating as a common fact that old ideas had passed away. “We happily do not live in an age,” the author wrote, “when it is necessary