

McCormick Hall and the Changing Role of Women at MIT

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4.603 Assignment 2: Public History

Introduction and Building Architecture

When tourists and prospective students visit MIT's campus, they often hear about Stanley McCormick Hall, MIT's only all-female dormitory (named after the husband of its founder, Katharine Dexter McCormick). Built in 1963 by Herbert Beckwith, an MIT architecture professor, the building's exterior is designed in the Brutalist style, with unadorned and intimidating concrete and glass panels (Cambridge Historical Commission, n.d.). On the interior, however, McCormick is much warmer and more welcoming; Katharine Dexter McCormick worked with Beckwith and the interior designers to create a social space, even donating many of her possessions to make residents feel at home (Resnick 1989, 54). The cozy atmosphere remains even today with comfortable chairs and grand pianos in the common rooms, which are used for everything from house meetings to study sessions.



McCormick Hall Green Living Room (image from MIT McCormick Hall).

McCormick's founding is portrayed -- to both visitors and residents -- as the revolutionary event that brought women into the hallowed halls of MIT for the first time, but in fact, women had attended MIT since the 1870s. While it cannot be denied that McCormick Hall was a catalyst for women's inclusion on the MIT campus, it was really one step in a 150-year-long evolution, and was certainly not the end of the road. Its real impact was not the number of women it housed, but rather how it shifted the way MIT viewed women and vice versa, setting up half a century of progress toward gender equality at MIT.

Women at MIT: Pre-McCormick Hall

Contrary to the popular narrative, a handful of women did attend MIT in its early days. Ellen Swallow Richards applied to MIT in 1870, and after a faculty vote, Richards became the first female student in MIT's history. Her name was left off the list of students so that the faculty could deny her existence if she failed -- the administration did not believe that a woman would succeed in the sciences and was unwilling to support her (certainly not a glowing recommendation for other women to apply to MIT). Her admission did not set a precedent for the admission of women; the faculty continued reviewing women's applications only on a case-by-case basis (Gray 2019, 7-9). In spite of these barriers, Richards eventually graduated, and MIT revised its admissions policy to accept women in 1883 (Fritts 2020).

Another early MIT alumna was none other than Katharine Dexter McCormick, who graduated in 1904. In a freshman essay titled "My Preparation for the MIT," McCormick

described how she studied at two nearby colleges and then in France and Germany, prior to applying to MIT (Resnick 1989, 53). After all that preparation, she was still forced to spend three years as a “special student” before she obtained what the faculty deemed to be a necessary level of knowledge to enter MIT as a regular student (MIT Office of Public Relations 1963, 4). While a student, she successfully fought against an MIT policy that required women to wear feathered hats, a fire hazard in laboratories (Iowa State University, n.d.). Even two decades after Richards had entered MIT, McCormick faced many of the same biased policies and heightened expectations of women relative to men.

Recognizing that MIT was merely paying lip service to its female students without supporting them at all, McCormick spent her adult life promoting women’s equality at MIT. In 1945, she donated her house at 120 Bay State Road in Boston as a dormitory for 20 women and paid for their taxi fare to and from campus (Gray 2019, 15). Because of her contributions and the smaller donations of other benefactors, the number of women at MIT slowly increased during the first half of the 20th century. Even so, fewer than 100 women attended MIT at any given time, and even fewer of them graduated. Katharine Dexter McCormick saw the need for a stronger women’s community to help women succeed at MIT.

Founding of McCormick Hall and Immediate Effects

McCormick donated \$1.5 million to MIT in 1960 for the construction of a women’s dormitory (Gray 2019, 30). In the same year, MIT’s President James Killian and Chancellor Julius Stratton pledged to increase the admission of women and support their female students (Cambridge Historical Commission, n.d.). They wanted to show the world that women belong at MIT and in the scientific fields, and used the construction of McCormick Hall as a symbol to demonstrate that (MIT Bulletin 1964, 394).



West Wing of McCormick, circa 1964 (image from Cambridge Historical Commission, n.d.).

The West Tower of McCormick Hall opened in 1963, and by 1964, the number of female applicants to MIT had doubled, filling the building to capacity (Gray 2019, 33) -- women heard the message and finally felt welcome on the MIT campus. Early McCormick alumna Sarah Simon (Class of 1972) noted that she chose MIT because there were 60 women per class, while other engineering schools had no women at all. Because of McCormick, she had a community on campus. Similarly, Karen Arenson (Class of 1970) stated that women finally felt that they had a home at MIT, and felt more comfortable attending MIT as a result (Ferrara 2013, video in References).



McCormick Hall alumnae Sarah Simon and Karen Arenson speaking about their experiences at MIT at a 2013 ceremony to honor the 50th anniversary of McCormick Hall's founding (Ferrara 2013, video in References).

However, MIT's admissions policy at the time dictated that the number of women admitted to MIT should be limited by the amount of housing available to them. The MIT administration claimed that, as McCormick grew overcrowded, they would be "[forced] again to apply more rigorous standards in the selection of female than of male applicants." (MIT Bulletin 1964, 423). Meanwhile, male students were allowed to live off campus, with no such admission quotas -- despite the strides that had been made, there were still members of the administration who believed that only a few gifted women should attend MIT alongside the men. Determined that the women deserving of admission should not be thwarted by such policies, Katharine Dexter McCormick provided a second donation in order to build McCormick Hall's East Tower (Elemental MIT 2016, video in References).



East wing of McCormick Hall under construction in 1966 (image from Cambridge Historical Commission, n.d.).

Long-Term Effects of McCormick Hall

McCormick Hall brought a large influx of women to MIT, but it was a long road to women's equality at MIT even from that point. MIT had not really changed from the early 1900s until the 1970s -- they believed that they had done their due diligence toward female students, while they continued to limit women's campus involvement in the early years after McCormick's founding. It was not until 1970 that MIT (under pressure from a growing number of female applicants) changed its admission policy, stating for the first time that female applicants should be judged solely on their merits rather than on the capacity of McCormick Hall. This change increased the number of women from 7.6% (Fall 1969) to 9.4% (Fall 1970) of the freshman class (MIT Bulletin 1971, 312). Similarly, it took until the 1972 passage of Title IX for a women's athletics program to be established (Gray 2019, 42), although female students had advocated for the creation of sports teams for a decade.

Despite these early setbacks, McCormick Hall really did change MIT's attitude toward women over several decades. The administration ignored women in McCormick Hall's early days, but as McCormick residents became more involved in the MIT community, they spurred broader reforms on the administration level. The language used to refer to women in the annual President's Reports shifted -- while 1960s reports discussed the "problem" of having more qualified female applicants than they could house (and therefore admit), later bulletins stated that "men and women together create a balanced discourse and world view" (MIT Bulletin 1993, 10) and advocated for diversity and affirmative-action programs. In 1973, the administration began disseminating booklets titled "MIT: A Place for Women" to prospective applicants, in hopes of recruiting more women (MIT Bulletin 1973, 39). As a result of this campaign, the percentage of female students rose from 9.1% in 1973 to 23% (with 33% of MIT's undergraduates being women) in 1992 (MIT Bulletin 1993, 102). Only 15 tenured faculty in the School of Science were women in the early 1990s, so MIT launched a campaign to recruit female faculty members, raising the number of female professors by 40% by 1999 (Committee of Women Faculty 1999, 11). Comparing these programs to the requirement that women wear feathered hats a hundred years earlier, it is evident that the integration of women into the MIT campus (resulting from McCormick Hall's presence) had irreversibly changed the way MIT viewed women.

Prior to the creation of McCormick Hall, it was not clear to outsiders or MIT community members that women even had a place at MIT. Katharine Dexter McCormick's donation brought the issue of women's inclusion at MIT to the attention of the administration, and in the decades following McCormick's founding, the mindset of the MIT administration slowly became more inclusive of women. McCormick Hall was not the final solution to the issue of women's equality at MIT, but it was a major step that kick-started a new era of progress. It paved the way for women like Jasmina Aganovic (Class of 2009), who felt that there was never a barrier as a woman seeking admission to MIT and pursuing a science degree (Ferrara 2013, video in References). After 150 years of MIT's history and half a century of active efforts for women's equality post-McCormick Hall, we are finally approaching the ideal that Richards and McCormick envisioned.

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