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GLOBAL CLASSROOMS

'Sisters' Colleges See a Bounty in the Middle East

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Women's colleges are a dwindling breed in the United States.

So this spring the admissions deans of the five leading women's colleges — Bryn Mawr, Barnard, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley and Smith — went recruiting to a place where single-sex education is more than a niche product: the Middle East.

For three weeks they visited schools in Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, describing what a liberal-arts women's college can offer academically ambitious students. (They skipped Saudi Arabia, where, their trip coordinator warned, they might need a male escort.)

Everywhere, they talked about how women benefited from having their own colleges where women make up a large part of the faculty and students are encouraged to excel in male-dominated fields like science and math. And they flaunted their accomplished alumnae, including [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), [Emily Dickinson](#), [Diane Sawyer](#), [Katharine Hepburn](#) and [Madeleine K. Albright](#).

"We still prepare a disproportionate number of women scientists," Jenny Rickard, dean of admissions at Bryn Mawr, said in describing the presentations. "We're really about the empowerment of women and enabling women to get a top-notch education."

Like universities nationwide, the five women's colleges are expanding their overseas recruiting, and although reaching out to the Middle East seems logical to them, in some ways it is an odd fit.

While single-sex schools in the Middle East are protected environments, reflecting women's traditional roles in Muslim society, the American colleges, for all their white-glove history and academic prominence, are liberal strongholds where students fiercely debate political action, gender identity and issues like "heteronormativity," the marginalizing of standards that are other than heterosexual. Middle Eastern students who already attend these colleges tell of a transition that can be jarring.

Pasangi Perera Weerasingag, who attended a coeducational British-model high school in Dubai, said that when she arrived at Mount Holyoke last year, she was shocked by the presence of so many lesbians among the students. But she adjusted, she says, and now loves the environment, with the widespread willingness to discuss race and class ("so refreshing") and her classmates' engagement in politics.

On their trip to the Middle East, the American deans visited American international schools, British-model schools, Indian-model schools, coeducational schools filled with children of expatriates and schools of local girls who do not much mix with men. Reactions varied, according to e-mail messages from counselors and students at the schools, but over all the region seemed fertile ground for recruiting. For some families, the

colleges represented a compromise between the familiarity of home and an all-out plunge into American ways.

"You could almost see light bulbs going off in student's minds, as if, 'Why didn't I think of them a while ago?'" said Jennifer Melton, a counselor at the American School in Dubai.

"You could also see parents exhale with less anxiety around the process," Ms. Melton said, "and the fact that there really are institutions that are a good fit for their daughters."

In the 1960s, there were some 300 women's colleges in the United States; now there are fewer than 60. But Bryn Mawr, Barnard, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley and Smith — known as the Sisters, those of the storied Seven Sisters left after Radcliffe merged with [Harvard](#) and Vassar began admitting men — are thriving, attracting record numbers of high-achieving applicants, who are drawn by their history of academic prominence.

Still, most American high school girls never consider applying to a women's college. And because the Sisters do not get as many applicants as comparable coeducational colleges, they are not as selective as other top institutions. So an influx of applications from the Middle East would be especially welcome.

But the admissions deans say their foray to the Middle East was not an effort to find young Muslim women who could be comfortable only in a world of women. "People keep waiting for us to say we went because we were expecting it to be so conservative that it would be a great fit," said Jennifer Desjarlais, Wellesley's dean of admission. "That wasn't why we went. That never occurred to us."

The idea, she said, grew out of an international conference, where counselors from the Middle East said they wished more American liberal arts colleges would visit their schools.

Ms. Weerasingag, who is Sri Lankan but grew up in Dubai, said that when she told friends she was going to Mount Holyoke, "they all said, 'Why, why would you go to a women's college?' and immediately began to make jokes about homosexuality."

She said the number of lesbian students on campus "was the only part that came as a culture shock to me."

"It was very open — there were open displays of affection," she added. "At the beginning, there were times when I'd have to close my eyes and say, 'O.K., I'm at Mount Holyoke, and it's different.' But that lasted only a week or so, and now I have so many friends who are openly gay, and it makes no difference."

Ms. Weerasingag, 20, finds other aspects of Mount Holyoke life invigorating. "We didn't have a political atmosphere in Dubai," she said. "At Mount Holyoke, during the primaries I couldn't even sleep, because everyone around me was so involved."

At the recruiting presentations, some students saw the women's colleges as their best route to the United States. "My options of traveling to the United States are limited by my conservative upbringing," said Ascia al-Faraj, a student at the American International School in Kuwait. "But the chances of attending one of the Sisters schools is more likely." She plans to apply to several of the Sisters.

Mark Ray, a counselor at the school, said he believed that in general, "parents would be much more likely to

send their daughters to one of these schools rather than to a coed university.”

But in many Middle Eastern families, it remains unthinkable to send an 18-year-old daughter to America alone. So there were questions about transfer admissions from young women who planned to start college close to home, said Diane Anci, dean of admission at Mount Holyoke.

“We also, on some occasions, got questions about living off campus, and the neighborhood around the college,” she said, “which meant, ‘Could my mother or auntie come and live in an off-campus house with me?’ ”

Even before the trip, the Sisters had been told that single-sex residences might be an important draw for Middle Eastern students, Ms. Anci said.

Students were more interested, though, in hearing about the freedom they would have at the women’s colleges, Mr. Ray said.

“The greatest concern expressed by the ladies, which was quickly dispelled, was their idea they would be in a lockdown environment,” he said.

The deans made clear that was not the case. “None of us is a nunnery, so much of our presentation is to reassure young women that there are opportunities to interact with young men,” said Audrey Smith, dean of enrollment at [Smith College](#).

Indeed, at each of the presentations, the Sisters stressed the frequent contact with men at nearby colleges, the possibility of cross-registering for classes and the coeducational clubs.

Kristen Duff, an Australian student at the American School in Dubai, said that she planned to apply to Barnard but that many of her Arab and part-Arab friends had not been won over.

“They have conservative parents,” she said, “and I think that in their independence in college they really want to attend coed schools in a foreign country. Going to a girls’ school would seem like a step backwards.”

Over all, the deans said, selling single-sex education was less difficult than selling the liberal arts in a region where professional education is more the norm.

“The question we got most often was, ‘What would I do afterwards?’ ” said Ms. Rickard, of Bryn Mawr. “I talked about how liberal arts prepared you for the jobs that haven’t been invented yet. The example I’d give is my own career. I was a liberal arts student when there were no computers, and then I found myself at a software company.”

Several high school counselors said their students had been impressed with the lively confidence of the deans, viewing them as role models. Ms Anci, of Mount Holyoke, recalls a like moment.

“After one long presentation in Dubai, where the audience was rapt,” she said, “one of the girls came up afterward, very bright-eyed, and said: ‘I don’t know exactly what I want to do, but I know I want to do great things. And I know if I come to one of your schools, I will do great things.’ ”