

## Sister Power

### Leading the Charge for Women's Education Worldwide

By Joanne V. Creighton

It's not surprising that women's colleges, like women themselves, are good at building connections. Presidents, deans, and other representatives of the original "Seven Sisters" continue to meet together yearly, even though one of our sisters, Vassar, is now coed and another, Radcliffe, has metamorphosed into an institute. We, now the "Seven Sibs," are still strengthened by our continuing affiliation. So too is Mount Holyoke a founding and active member of the Women's College Coalition, now in its thirty-fourth year. This association brings together women's colleges and universities of all kinds from across the United States and Canada.

A cynic might suggest that the coalition's "sisterhood" is akin to that on the *Titanic*. From a high of over 300 women's colleges in North America, there are now just over sixty of us left. Historical forces over the last forty years have resulted in women being welcomed instead of excluded from higher education. Have we, then, lost our reason for being? No, but we must change as the world changes around us. And so we are. In fact, much is positive about how women's colleges have adapted to new realities: many, to be sure, by going coed or merging, but many others by reinvigorating their institutional missions. Dozens of women's colleges, including Mount Holyoke, are stronger than ever.

As the coalition's chair, I have urged our organization to find collective strength and purpose in advocacy for the education and advancement of women. That agenda is not complete.



Indeed, taking the long view of women throughout history, it has only just begun. Advancing educational opportunity for women across all ethnic, racial, age, and socioeconomic groups continues to be the great unfinished agenda of the twenty-first century.

Moreover, women's colleges continue to be about access. Many of us welcome populations that have been traditionally excluded from higher education including older women and certain socioeconomic and ethnic populations. Mount Holyoke is also the most international of any leading liberal arts college, coed or single sex, with over 15 percent of our students from nearly seventy different countries. In a related initiative, along with Smith, we founded and hosted the inaugural meeting of Women's Education Worldwide, the first ever alliance of women's colleges from around the world.

We are also about equity. The bad old days of blatant, systematic, and systemic gender discrimination aren't so long ago, only a generation or two, neither long enough surely to erase the social, economic, and psychological effects nor to ameliorate the continuing gender imbalance of power in society. We need to help students to navigate and to work to redress that inequality and lost opportunity.

Of course, educating and advancing women is not a mission we carry on alone, but in conjunction with schools, coed colleges and universities, governmental and nongovernmental agencies, and well-intentioned educators, political leaders, and activists. I have pushed for the coalition to reach out to others to build a more powerful coalition. One of those partnerships is with the New York Times Knowledge Network, which cosponsored a conference on women's leadership at its offices in New York last year, and in March 2006 cosponsored a conference on global outsourcing on our campus. So too has the coalition used the *Times* to call attention to its work. You may have seen one of our ads, "Women Can't Do Science?" or "Women's Education: The Great Unfinished Agenda." Our goal is to keep public attention focused on the critical importance of women's education.

Because it seems only natural that Mount Holyoke College, the world's longest-standing higher education institution for women, should be at the center of this endeavor, I especially enjoy leading the charge.