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USA TODAY

December 31, 2003, Wednesday, FINAL EDITION

SECTION: LIFE; Pg. 7D

LENGTH: 1241 words

HEADLINE: **Finishing school** no more

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BODY:

Marriage or career: that's the dilemma posed in *Mona Lisa Smile*, the new Julia Roberts movie about social pressures facing women in 1953. Her character, an art history instructor named Katherine Watson, urges her charges at the elite all-women's Wellesley College to challenge the stereotypes and themselves.

"You could bake your cake and eat it, too," she tells one of her brightest pupils, who is wavering between Yale Law School and marriage.

By movie's end, the young women begin to see her point. But Watson and the Wellesley administration part ways. At one point, Roberts' character derides Wellesley as "a **finishing school** disguised as a college."

So what would the independent-minded Watson say were she to visit a women's college today?

"She would be startled and quite pleased," says Mary Brown Bullock, president (and alumna) of Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. The bonds of friendship are still there, she suggests. But gone are the etiquette lessons, such as the tutorial in *Mona Lisa Smile* on "how to cross and uncross your legs." And far from conforming to traditional expectations of women, alumnae are disproportionately high achievers.

According to the Women's College Coalition, a 62-campus member association representing 70 women's colleges in the USA and Canada, women's college graduates account for less than 4% of college-educated women but 30% of a *Business Week* list of 50 rising female stars in corporate America, and more than 20% of women in Congress.

Among them is Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Wellesley Class of '69, who famously offended some

voters during her husband's presidential campaign by saying she could have "stayed home and baked cookies and had teas" instead of becoming a lawyer.

At Wellesley, she writes in her 2003 memoir, *Living History*, "you didn't have to take second seat to anybody."

Once, the only place a woman could go for an Ivy League-type education was a women's college such as Wellesley, just outside Boston, or Smith, in Northampton, Mass. Today, women have far more options. (Indeed, they're outpacing men in bachelor's and some advanced degrees -- but that's another story.)

Deep-seated cultural demands on women remain, however. Consider the findings of a year-long review of Duke University in Durham, N.C. Released in September, it details a troubling climate for female students and faculty at the co-ed campus.

Undergraduate women "feel pressure to wear fashionable (and often impractical) clothes and shoes, to diet and exercise excessively and to hide their intelligence in order to succeed with their male peers," the report says, adding that many undergraduate women described a need to achieve an ideal of "effortless perfection." Among faculty, women were less likely than men to report a spirit of collegiality and job satisfaction, conveying a "disturbing sense of lack of equal respect," the report said.

A number of experts suggest the findings aren't unique to Duke. Studies of faculty at Princeton and MIT, for instance, drew similar conclusions.

"Women today are in some ways under more pressure than the women in the film," says Nancy Bekavac, president of Scripps College, a women's college near Los Angeles. "Given the incredible revolution in American society with women working outside the home, how far have we really come?"

But while the Eisenhower-era Wellesley depicted in *Mona Lisa Smile* plays into gender stereotypes, Bekavac and other educators say women's colleges today are more important than ever.

"What women's colleges do -- and do even better today clearly than they did in the '50s -- is help women gain a sense of confidence that what they choose ultimately is going to work for them. They have the confidence to try various things," says Nora Kizer Bell, president of Hollins University, a women's college in Roanoke, Va.

By removing men as classmates and competition, women face fewer barriers -- and distractions -- in reaching their goals, be they majoring in physics, playing rugby or becoming student body president.

"There's no one to judge you. You can just be yourself," says Wellesley student Elisa McDaniel, 19, a neuroscience major who was an extra in the movie.

Duke president Nannerl Keohane, a Wellesley grad and its former president, agrees that women's colleges provide a special brand of support, including positive role models in high-level academic positions. Still, she says, co-ed schools like Duke offer the opportunity to "make sure men and women respect each other as equal partners."

As the Duke report suggests, there's work to do on that. That's why, Keohane says, wheels are in motion to start a program as early as next fall aimed at creating a sort of women's college within Duke. Under the plan, a limited number of women would take some classes together, meet weekly for dinner, work regularly with female faculty mentors and take part in leadership programs. They could live together if they so chose.

In short, the plan integrates key benefits of a women's college into a co-ed campus, which offers "the opportunity for men and women to work side by side and to become friends," Keohane says.

If women's colleges have drawbacks, the limited interaction with men is a big one, especially for heterosexual women.

Meeting eligible men was a challenge in 1953, but is "perhaps even harder" today, says Wellesley sophomore Debby Dowlin, 19, a sociology/Spanish major who had a bit part in the movie. "There are no longer any all-male institutions that are interested in organizing social connections."

That's not to suggest husband-hunting is the No. 1 goal of today's typical Wellesley girl. Far from it. But some things haven't changed.

"Like the women in the movie, I too dream of meeting the perfect husband and having a family," Dowlin says. "But I see it coming about 10 years later."

Art imitates life, somewhat

How accurate is Mona Lisa Smile in its picture of 1950s college women?

'Mona Lisa' says . . . The reality . . .

In 1953, Yale reserved five slots for female applicants to its law school -- one, unofficially, for "a Wellesley girl." No word on the Wellesley preference, but Yale officials estimate no more than a half-dozen women entered the law school in 1954, representing about 5% of its first-year class. (This year 91 first-year women are enrolled, or 47% of the class, and 104 men.)

After Julia Roberts' character takes students to view an original Jackson Pollock painting, she is warned by the Wellesley powers-that-be not to teach modern art. The script accurately "emphasized the intelligence of Wellesley students and . . . the close mentoring relationships between our faculty and students, which is as true of Wellesley today as it was 50 years ago," a statement from Wellesley says. But, it notes, Wellesley "was one of the first colleges or universities to teach modern art," beginning in the late 1920s. The instructor, Alfred Barr Jr., went on to found the Museum of Modern Art.

A campus ritual for seniors involves a hoop-rolling contest, in which the winner is destined to become the first of her peers to get married. True. But as the image of women in society has evolved, so have the terms of the tradition. At one point, the winner's fate was to become the first CEO. Today she will be the first to achieve success -- "however she defines it."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, B/W, Columbia Pictures; PHOTO, B/W, May 2003 photo by Jon Mahoney, AP; PHOTO, B/W, Scripps College; PHOTO, B/W, Agnes Scott College; PHOTO, B/W, The Raleigh News & Observer; Encouraging students to bake your cake and eat it, too": Julia Roberts plays a teacher to students Laura Allen, left, and Kirsten Dunst in *Mona Lisa Smile*, a film about the repressive atmosphere at Wellesley College in the 1950s. clinton <>Three women at the top of their field<>Keohane: Duke president. <>Bekavac: Scripps College president. <>Bullock: Agnes Scott president.<>Circle of life: Wellesley seniors take part in the 2003 Hoop Roll. New tradition says the winner will be the first in her class to succeed.

LOAD-DATE: January 02, 2004