

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood

BYLINE: By LOUISE STORY**SECTION:** Section A; Column 5; National Desk; Pg. 1**LENGTH:** 2077 words

Cynthia Liu is precisely the kind of high achiever Yale wants: smart (1510 SAT), disciplined (4.0 grade point average), competitive (finalist in Texas oratory competition), musical (pianist), athletic (runner) and altruistic (hospital volunteer). And at the start of her sophomore year at Yale, Ms. Liu is full of ambition, planning to go to law school.

So will she join the long tradition of famous Ivy League graduates? Not likely. By the time she is 30, this accomplished 19-year-old expects to be a stay-at-home mom.

"My mother's always told me you can't be the best career woman and the best mother at the same time," Ms. Liu said matter-of-factly. "You always have to choose one over the other."

At Yale and other top colleges, women are being groomed to take their place in an ever more diverse professional elite. It is almost taken for granted that, just as they make up half the students at these institutions, they will move into leadership roles on an equal basis with their male classmates.

There is just one problem with this scenario: many of these women say that is not what they want.

Many women at the nation's most elite colleges say they have already decided that they will put aside their careers in favor of raising children. Though some of these students are not planning to have children and some hope to have a family and work full time, many others, like Ms. Liu, say they will happily play a traditional female role, with motherhood their main commitment.

Much attention has been focused on career women who leave the work force to rear children. What seems to be changing is that while many women in college two or three decades ago expected to have full-time careers, their daughters, while still in college, say they have already decided to suspend or end their careers when they have children.

"At the height of the women's movement and shortly thereafter, women were much more firm in their expectation that they could somehow combine full-time work with child rearing," said Cynthia E. Russett, a professor of American history who has taught at Yale since 1967. "The women today are, in effect, turning realistic."

Dr. Russett is among more than a dozen faculty members and administrators at the most exclusive institutions who have been on campus for decades and who said in interviews that they had noticed the changing attitude.

Many students say staying home is not a shocking idea among their friends. Shannon Flynn, an 18-year-old from Guilford, Conn., who is a freshman at Harvard, says many of her girlfriends do not want to work full time.

"Most probably do feel like me, maybe even tending toward wanting to not work at all," said Ms. Flynn, who plans to work part time after having children, though she is torn because she has worked so hard in school.

"Men really aren't put in that position," she said.

Uzezi Abugo, a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania who hopes to become a lawyer, says she, too, wants to be home

with her children at least until they are in school.

"I've seen the difference between kids who did have their mother stay at home and kids who didn't, and it's kind of like an obvious difference when you look at it," said Ms. Abugo, whose mother, a nurse, stayed home until Ms. Abugo was in first grade.

While the changing attitudes are difficult to quantify, the shift emerges repeatedly in interviews with Ivy League students, including 138 freshman and senior females at Yale who replied to e-mail questions sent to members of two residential colleges over the last school year.

The interviews found that 85 of the students, or roughly 60 percent, said that when they had children, they planned to cut back on work or stop working entirely. About half of those women said they planned to work part time, and about half wanted to stop work for at least a few years.

Two of the women interviewed said they expected their husbands to stay home with the children while they pursued their careers. Two others said either they or their husbands would stay home, depending on whose career was furthest along.

The women said that pursuing a rigorous college education was worth the time and money because it would help position them to work in meaningful part-time jobs when their children are young or to attain good jobs when their children leave home.

In recent years, elite colleges have emphasized the important roles they expect their alumni -- both men and women -- to play in society.

For example, earlier this month, Shirley M. Tilghman, the president of Princeton University, welcomed new freshmen, saying: "The goal of a Princeton education is to prepare young men and women to take up positions of leadership in the 21st century. Of course, the word 'leadership' conjures up images of presidents and C.E.O.'s, but I want to stress that my idea of a leader is much broader than that."

She listed education, medicine and engineering as other areas where students could become leaders.

In an e-mail response to a question, Dr. Tilghman added: "There is nothing inconsistent with being a leader and a stay-at-home parent. Some women (and a handful of men) whom I have known who have done this have had a powerful impact on their communities."

Yet the likelihood that so many young women plan to opt out of high-powered careers presents a conundrum.

"It really does raise this question for all of us and for the country: when we work so hard to open academics and other opportunities for women, what kind of return do we expect to get for that?" said Marlyn McGrath Lewis, director of undergraduate admissions at Harvard, who served as dean for coeducation in the late 1970's and early 1980's.

It is a complicated issue and one that most schools have not addressed. The women they are counting on to lead society are likely to marry men who will make enough money to give them a real choice about whether to be full-time mothers, unlike those women who must work out of economic necessity.

It is less than clear what universities should, or could, do about it. For one, a person's expectations at age 18 are less than perfect predictors of their life choices 10 years later. And in any case, admissions officers are not likely to ask applicants whether they plan to become stay-at-home moms.

University officials said that success meant different things to different people and that universities were trying to broaden students' minds, not simply prepare them for jobs.

"What does concern me," said Peter Salovey, the dean of Yale College, "is that so few students seem to be able to think outside the box; so few students seem to be able to imagine a life for themselves that isn't constructed along traditional gender roles."

There is, of course, nothing new about women being more likely than men to stay home to rear children.

According to a 2000 survey of Yale alumni from the classes of 1979, 1984, 1989 and 1994, conducted by the Yale Office of Institutional Research, more men from each of those classes than women said that work was their primary activity -- a gap

that was small among alumni in their 20's but widened as women moved into their prime child-rearing years. Among the alumni surveyed who had reached their 40's, only 56 percent of the women still worked, compared with 90 percent of the men.

A 2005 study of comparable Yale alumni classes found that the pattern had not changed. Among the alumni who had reached their early 40's, just over half said work was their primary activity, compared with 90 percent of the men. Among the women who had reached their late 40's, some said they had returned to work, but the percentage of women working was still far behind the percentage of men.

A 2001 survey of Harvard Business School graduates found that 31 percent of the women from the classes of 1981, 1985 and 1991 who answered the survey worked only part time or on contract, and another 31 percent did not work at all, levels strikingly similar to the percentages of the Yale students interviewed who predicted they would stay at home or work part time in their 30's and 40's.

What seems new is that while many of their mothers expected to have hard-charging careers, then scaled back their professional plans only after having children, the women of this generation expect their careers to take second place to child rearing.

"It never occurred to me," Rebecca W. Bushnell, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania, said about working versus raising children. "Thirty years ago when I was heading out, I guess I was just taking it one step at a time."

Dr. Bushnell said young women today, in contrast, are thinking and talking about part-time or flexible work options for when they have children. "People have a heightened awareness of trying to get the right balance between work and family."

Sarah Currie, a senior at Harvard, said many of the men in her American Family class last fall approved of women's plans to stay home with their children.

"A lot of the guys were like, 'I think that's really great,'" Ms. Currie said. "One of the guys was like, 'I think that's sexy.' Staying at home with your children isn't as polarizing of an issue as I envision it is for women who are in their 30's now."

For most of the young women who responded to e-mail questions, a major factor shaping their attitudes seemed to be their experience with their own mothers, about three out of five of whom did not work at all, took several years off or worked only part time.

"My stepmom's very proud of my choice because it makes her feel more valuable," said Kellie Zesch, a Texan who graduated from the University of North Carolina two years ago and who said that once she had children, she intended to stay home for at least five years and then consider working part time. "It justified it to her, that I don't look down on her for not having a career."

Similarly, students who are committed to full-time careers, without breaks, also cited their mothers as influences. Laura Sullivan, a sophomore at Yale who wants to be a lawyer, called her mother's choice to work full time the "greatest gift."

"She showed me what it meant to be an amazing mother and maintain a career," Ms. Sullivan said.

Some of these women's mothers, who said they did not think about these issues so early in their lives, said they were surprised to hear that their college-age daughters had already formed their plans.

Emily Lechner, one of Ms. Liu's roommates, hopes to stay home a few years, then work part time as a lawyer once her children are in school.

Her mother, Carol, who once thought she would have a full-time career but gave it up when her children were born, was pleasantly surprised to hear that. "I do have this bias that the parents can do it best," she said. "I see a lot of women in their 30's who have full-time nannies, and I just question if their kids are getting the best."

For many feminists, it may come as a shock to hear how unbothered many young women at the nation's top schools are by the strictures of traditional roles.

"They are still thinking of this as a private issue; they're accepting it," said Laura Wexler, a professor of American studies and women's and gender studies at Yale. "Women have been given full-time working career opportunities and encouragement

with no social changes to support it.

"I really believed 25 years ago," Dr. Wexler added, "that this would be solved by now."

Angie Ku, another of Ms. Liu's roommates who had a stay-at-home mom, talks nonchalantly about attending law or business school, having perhaps a 10-year career and then staying home with her children.

"Parents have such an influence on their children," Ms. Ku said. "I want to have that influence. Me!"

She said she did not mind if that limited her career potential.

"I'll have a career until I have two kids," she said. "It doesn't necessarily matter how far you get. It's kind of like the experience: I have tried what I wanted to do."

Ms. Ku added that she did not think it was a problem that women usually do most of the work raising kids.

"I accept things how they are," she said. "I don't mind the status quo. I don't see why I have to go against it."

After all, she added, those roles got her where she is.

"It worked so well for me," she said, "and I don't see in my life why it wouldn't work."

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GRAPHIC: Photo: Emily Lechner, at home in North Potomac, Md., with her mother, Carol, is a student at Yale who plans to become a lawyer, but who says her career will take a back seat once she starts having children. (Photo by Doug Mills/The New York Times)(pg. A18)

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