

“Not in the Least Fond of College Itself or the Work”: Examining Educational Work in American College Girls’ Novels

In the summer before her sophomore year, the title character of Julia A. Schwartz’s *Elinor’s College Career* (1906), complains, “The only reason I care about coming [to school] this year is for the sake of seeing the girls. I’m not in the least fond of the college itself or the work, you know” (105). While Elinor claims that she dislikes college work, American girls in the late nineteenth century into the turn of the century were deeply interested in the college experience, as evidenced by the popularity of college novels especially those about the Seven Sister colleges. While scholars know that readers were interested in the social aspect of the college experience, they have not focused primarily on the depiction of the college education itself. While educational histories can describe the courses that girls were taking and the textbooks they were reading, how did college novels depict the work of college? This paper will examine the college novel through the lens of education, asking how girls’ scholarship was depicted and how it reflects the growth of college opportunities for women at the time.

Much of the work of college novels is to promote the female college experience, as the characters in Elizabeth W. Champney’s *Three Vassar Girls* series (1883-1892), routinely praised their beloved Vassar as they traveled. However, in *Elinor’s College Career*, Elinor only attends a women’s college because her mother is one of its earliest alumni. Yet, the novel broadly considers the reasons why girls of differing background choose to attend college and why they find it to be a meaningful experience. My paper will describe how this novel and other popular college novels define what it means to be a woman going to college and become educated as a woman intellectual. It will consider how the students are taught and the type of girls who get go to college, through their families or scholarship. Overall, my paper will focus on how college girls’ novels represent educational opportunities, as their authors were constructing their own versions of school to advocate for education.