

FIRST PERSON / *Yingtong Guo '18*

Revisiting Deerfield's Return to Coeducation





Yingtong Guo, currently in her first year at UCLA, was one of two inaugural Montague Grant recipients last spring. Funded by Richard W. Montague '52, the grant promotes research and writing on the history and purpose of Deerfield Academy to current students. Using documents from the Academy Archives, Yingtong examined the early days of the Academy's "return to coeducation" in 1989, and using her research as a starting point, she reflected on the progress of gender equality at Deerfield and in the world at large through that 29-year lens. What follows is an excerpted version of Yingtong's essay.

In the early 1970s, some of Deerfield's peer schools, such as Phillips Academy Andover and Choate Rosemary Hall merged with existing girls' schools, while others, such as Phillips Academy Exeter, Hotchkiss, and Groton, simply started admitting female students. By the 1980s, single-sex schools still existed, but they already faced stiff competition from coeducational institutions. As Michael Cary—then Deerfield's dean of admission noted—"many fine students never put Deerfield on their list." The school's ever-thinning pile of applications made it clear that it was failing to attract the best and the brightest not only due to the ineligibility of half of the teenage population to try their luck, but also because of the reluctance of many of the ablest boys to enroll in a male-only institution.

After the Board of Trustees voted twenty for and two against coeducation on January 30, 1988, then-Headmaster Robert Kaufmann sent a letter addressed to all members of the Deerfield community, reminding them of the school's purpose: "recruiting the best and most diverse student body and assembling the strongest faculty," and informing them that these goals "were best accomplished in a coeducational setting."

However, many still saw Deerfield's exceptional ethos as inextricably intertwined with its traditional maleness. In a poll conducted in the *Deerfield Scroll* three months prior to the Board vote, two-thirds of the senior class and 57 percent of the school as a whole (faculty and staff) had opposed the revolutionary decision. "How could the trustees still stand there smiling," asked one senior, "while they watched hundreds of mournful Deerfield boys, loyal to the end, choking back tears while singing our school songs as Mr. Kaufmann made his declaration?"

In spite of such resistance, a transition plan went into motion. The camaraderie and loyalty Deerfield boys felt toward each other resulted not from their maleness, Mr. Kaufmann countered, but from their strong sense of community and collaborative pursuit of excellence, which a female presence would only support and expand. By emphasizing that his students' qualities "were not gender-based," Mr. Kaufmann expressed his belief in the inherent potential of teenage girls—a belief that explains the thoroughness of his preparations for the following school year.

GETTING READY

From the Dining Hall to dormitories, subtle, yet important, changes were made. Coaches were assigned to newly-formed girls' varsity teams and a part-time dance instructor was hired to teach ballet, modern, and tap to students at all levels. To ensure representation of the female gender, the Student Council planned to welcome girls to its ranks from each of the classes; other organizations, such as the Peer Counselors and the Christian Fellowship, reserved special leadership positions for 1989's women visionaries. And a "Style Committee" that included students and faculty announced that all Deerfield awards could be presented to either gender, with the exception of one, the McDermott Prize. A comparable "sister prize" was soon announced.

New rules were established and previously unnecessary services were put in place: On Fridays between 8:00 and 10:00pm and on Saturdays between 8:00 and 11:00pm, students were given permission to visit members of the opposite sex in their rooms, as long as doors stood open and lights burnt brightly. The school did not endorse adolescent sexual activity, but the Health Center would offer contraceptive counseling and pregnancy testing as requested.

During the spring of 1989, a lecture series delivered by invited educators ranging from professors at Dartmouth College to the headmistress of Miss Porter's School spoke on topics that included "A Non-sexist Curriculum—Teaching Science to Girls and Boys" and "Women in the Arts," among others.

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Moreover, Mr. Kaufmann believed that the community needed to see “not only women in leadership roles, but also women on a numerical parity with men.” In addition to female faculty, a female stock clerk and a female security guard were hired to replace male employees who had retired.

A list of neutral synonyms was compiled in an effort to replace ostracizing terms in Deerfield's common vocabulary. “Chairman,” for example, became “chair,” while “masters” and “corridor masters” would be called “teachers” and “faculty residents.” Likewise, “son” was changed to “one” in the “Deerfield Evensong.”

By providing equal campus housing, offering an education inside and outside the classroom, and hiring new staff members who might serve as mother figures and role models to both girls and boys, as well as combating the stereotypical thinking of some of the pre-coeducation student body, Mr. Kaufmann was striving to keep Deerfield's new girls healthy and safe. He helped facilitate their search for friends and mentors, nurture the community's respect for their goals and accomplishments, and placed them in positions to become leaders on and off campus.

A GREAT AND (NOT SO) SUDDEN CHANGE

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley wrote that “nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change,” and in the winter of 1989, Deerfield's Admission Office could have opted for more radical models of girls' enrollment. Proposals included a “flex model” that permitted a three to two proportion of new girls to new boys in all grades but the twelfth, while an “accelerated model” allowed at least eighty percent more girls than boys to enter the three under classes. However, the committee settled on a conservative “parity model,” which proposed accepting girls and boys in equal numbers over a four-year period. By the fall of 1989, 104 female boarders and 95 male boarders had decided to join the Deerfield community.

A decade later, when a retired Mr. Kaufmann returned to Deerfield to give a speech that celebrated the transformations the school had undergone over the prior ten years, he noted that from 1981 to 1988, the number of seniors who continued to pursue their studies at Ivy League colleges rose from 59 to 67 percent. In 1998 and 1999, that number had reached a figure close to 90 percent.

And although student matriculation constitutes only one measure of a school's quality, colleges seemed to agree that Deerfield had begun turning out more academic, artistic, and athletic high achievers after 1989.

Senior faculty who had taught at Deerfield since the 1970s confirmed that the school's co-curriculars had grown in diversity and popularity. The dance program, which initially comprised only two class levels and a dance activity that satisfied the athletic requirement, had also assembled a faculty troupe. The Rhapsody-D's, the female a cappella group, complemented the Mellow-D's, their male equivalents in popularity. Above all, school publications and community service were thriving, while both girls and boys athletics teams displayed admirable confidence, commitment, and success.

Pleased with a capable and flourishing student body, the alumni—even those who had attended an all-male Deerfield—were supporting their school with an unprecedented eagerness through a capital campaign. For the previous nine graduating classes, moreover, these donors were slightly more likely to be girls than boys.

Lastly, many agreed that the girls' presence had made Deerfield a more humane place. Not only had good humor—without malice and sarcasm—crossed gender lines, but the campus enjoyed a more relaxed and accessible atmosphere without the vehemence that had sometimes plagued fields and classrooms in years prior.

Since Deerfield's return to coeducation, the Academy's mission has included raising not only informed leaders and considerate girls and boys aware of gender issues, but also young women and young men who balance their bodies, minds, and souls. Perhaps Deerfield's success in achieving this has actually stemmed from its old reputation among ex-boys-only institutions as the last bastion for stereotypically male values, which are often dismissed as elitist and outdated today. “Because it was 1989,” Mr. Kaufmann said, “everyone expected us to do better. We had to be good enough so that three years in, we'd look as good as Andover did after 15.”

For a secluded community such as Deerfield's to catch up with American society, however, students, faculty, staff, and alumni needed a motivator a little stronger than outside pressure. Indeed, I believe they were driven from within by a desire to live up to our motto: “Be worthy of your heritage.” //