

By Karen Doss Bowman

# Empowering International Women

### All-Women's Colleges Cultivate Confidence and Leadership Skills in International Students

**FOR SAVITRI RESTREPO ALVAREZ**, the idea of attending an all-women's college was a new concept when she began her college search. She didn't know of any institutions exclusively for women in her native Colombia, South America.

**Across the globe, more women than ever before are pursuing a college education.**

But when an official representing Wellesley College visited her high school, Li Po Chun United World College of Hong Kong, Restrepo Alvarez fell in love with pictures of the campus. She also was intrigued by the institution's mission of empowering women.

"That mission to empower women who will make a difference definitely impressed me," says Restrepo Alvarez, a senior majoring in international relations-political science with a minor in Chinese language and literature. "I think Wellesley attracts women who are interested in prioritizing self-growth and very focused on the development of their intellectual capacities."

When she first arrived at Wellesley four years ago, Restrepo Alvarez struggled to adapt. But as she participated in classroom discussions and became involved in campus activities, she began to feel at home. A 2016 fellow of the Madeleine Korbelt Albright Institute for Global Affairs

Winter Session and recent intern at the Clinton Foundation, Restrepo Alvarez is grateful for the opportunities Wellesley has provided to expand her knowledge and develop leadership skills.

"I really started to like being at Wellesley when I saw myself pushing further and started meeting amazing women," says Restrepo Alvarez, who recently was selected for the inaugural class of Schwarzman Scholars—a program established by Blackstone Group cofounder Stephen Schwarzman that will give her the opportunity to live and study next year at Beijing's Tsinghua University. "The dynamics in a classroom with all women was definitely different than my experience at a co-ed high school, but I started to realize that women, including myself, were much more open to say what we think—to criticize and to engage in conversation regardless of who's listening."



Savitri Restrepo Alvarez, from Colombia, attends Wellesley College.

## Women Worldwide Attending College in Greater Numbers

Across the globe, more women than ever before are pursuing a college education. In 2011 some 45 percent of all international students coming to study in the United States were women, according to the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* report from that year, which is an annual report funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. And according to the latest *Open Doors* report (2015), three women's colleges ranked in the top 10 of the list of *Top 40 Baccalaureate Colleges Hosting International Students*: Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and Bryn Mawr College. Wellesley ranked in the top 20.

Mount Holyoke has a solid international presence on campus. With international students comprising 27 percent of the student body (down slightly from 30 per-



Bryn Mawr college students at May Day celebration.

cent in 2014), the college hosts about 400 international students from 70 countries. Additionally, more than 25 percent of the college's faculty was born outside the United States. The college received NAFSA's Senator Paul Simon Award for Comprehensive Internationalization in 2015 for excellence in international education.

Bryn Mawr's international students comprise 25 percent of the student population. At Smith, 14 percent of the students come from abroad, and international students comprise 13 percent of the student body at Wellesley College. A strong presence of international students on campus promotes intercultural understanding, says Susan Sutton, senior adviser for international initiatives at Bryn Mawr. "Think of what it means for our students at Bryn Mawr to have one-out-of-four students be an international student," Sutton says. "What it means is that we have international experience in dialogue right on campus all the time—every day in every single class. All students gain in terms of learning about the world as a whole, in terms of developing a sense of global citizenship and preparing themselves for careers. So everybody gains from creating a truly global community right here on campus."

While there are no definitive answers for why significant numbers of international students are choosing exclusively female institutions, administrators believe a combination of factors is at work. For many international students, college rankings from *U.S. News and World Report*, as well as other sources, are a critical starting point in the college search. Reputation typically matters for them, and Mount Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Smith, and

Wellesley all typically place among the top U.S. institutions. Additionally, the liberal arts college—whether single-sex or co-ed—has a growing appeal for international students.

"There seems to be an excitement about the concept of not having to know what you want to do when you arrive on campus," says Karen Kristof, senior associate director of admissions at Smith College. "The liberal arts approach is very much the opposite of many higher education systems around the world. In China, for example, students often have to know what they want to study or what career they want to pursue as soon as they enroll—and many times, they are assigned to a particular discipline according to their scores on the entrance exams. And in some cases

students do not even get a choice of where they'll study. So the U.S. higher education system, and the liberal arts in particular, are appealing to many international students."

### Recruiting International Students

For some institutions, such as Bryn Mawr, the rise in international students has come naturally, without much additional effort by the admissions team. Others have made a strategic effort to draw greater numbers of international students to campus. At Smith, that commitment began about five years ago to recruit a geographically diverse group of international students. The institution's administration backed this strategic initiative by providing resources to boost financial aid for international students, to hire an additional international admissions recruiter, and to bring school counselors from other countries to the Smith campus. The college supplements staff efforts by engaging students, faculty, and alumni who are traveling abroad in sharing the Smith story and building relationships with prospective international students.

"International students don't often have a chance to visit campus, so they gravitate to whatever information they can find about the campus," Kristof says. "Smith needs to have a presence in the countries where we're



Pelumi Botti, from Nigeria, attends Wellesley College.

recruiting so that prospective international students can feel good about the institution. It's important for us to get different representatives on the ground to work with them."

Relationship building continues once international students are offered admission. Mount Holyoke provides opportunities for international students to get to know students before they arrive on campus through the Global Partners Program. Upper-class students who have completed learning abroad experiences are paired with first-year international students and begin communicating during the summer before the new students arrive on campus. These long-distance connections plant seeds for growing community during the students' four years on campus.

"This program helps the international students to feel more like a part of the community before they even get here—they kind of know the ins and outs personally," says Donna Van Handle, dean of international students and a senior lecturer in German Studies at Mount Holyoke. "They feel that they have a better take on what the Mount Holyoke community is all about. That helps them with the transition to studying in the U.S."

### Making a Campus Feel Like Home

Adjusting to college can be difficult for any student. But adding the challenge of living and studying in a foreign country—far away from family and friends—can be overwhelming. While grappling with unfamiliar cultural values and practices, many international students struggle to adapt to a system of higher education that functions much differently from what they are accustomed to.

Many start this process as soon as students arrive on campus through international student orientation programs that introduce academic resources, immigration regulations, and student services, as well as give international students a taste of campus life.

At Smith, International Students Pre-orientation (ISP) lasts about a week, with leadership from members of the college's International Students Organization. Along with covering visa regulations and work



International Students at Wellesley College

authorizations, ISP offers fun activities, such as talent shows, roller skating and laser-tag outings, and karaoke night to break the ice and help students get to know each other.

"The ISP is really an integral part of our international students becoming Smithies," says Caitlin Szymkowicz, associate dean for international students and scholars at Smith. "Generations of international students talk about ISP as being the time they found their community and the support they needed. During this process, we focus on a lot of conversations with upperclassmen and with each other to try to create those bonds. As international students go into their first year, even if things get topsy-turvy because of cultural adjustments or because of adapting to college, they have a community to fall back on."

Bryn Mawr established "conversation groups" within the residence halls, with trained student facilitators leading discussions about the college experience—the struggles as well as the joys. These weekly conversations started out with a focus on international students but have grown to include U.S. students as well, creating more opportunity for building bridges between cultures.

"The statistics tell us that international students are doing fine," Sutton says. "They're retained at higher rates than U.S. students, they graduate more quickly than U.S. students on average, and they have higher GPAs than U.S. students on average. But we don't want to just go with those kinds of measures. So part of what we've been doing, of course, is having these conversations where we really tap their own experiences and assess what's happening to them and finding ways to bring U.S. and international students together more."

International students at Bryn Mawr also can take advantage of perks such as a special

kitchen on campus where they can cook their own foods and a worship room where students from different faith backgrounds can schedule times to hold religious ceremonies.

"We've been working on integration and connection and supporting international students in maintaining their own cultural systems so that they don't feel ripped out of their own context totally," Sutton says.

Providing a welcoming environment for international students often means adapting standard campus services. Career services, for example, may need to incorporate new strategies to assist international students in preparing for and searching for jobs in their home countries. Student health centers typically have a professional on staff with proper training to guide international students through the emotional challenges of adjusting to a new culture so far away from family and friends. And Wellesley's English Language Resource Center, for example, was created for students whose first language is not English, providing one-on-one tutoring to develop oral and written language skills.

Mount Holyoke's McCulloch Center for Global Initiatives—established in 2003 to support the college's strategic priority of strengthening global competence among its students—offers support for international students, including orientation, advising, guidance on immigration regulations, and other special services. But the center also brings together international and U.S. students, providing special courses and seminars, research projects, and international internship opportunities that prepare students for global leadership opportunities.

In a Mount Holyoke publication celebrating the McCulloch Center's tenth anniversary, alumna Nana Esi Hammah,

class of 2014, praises the college's focus on global learning.

"Classes offer wonderful opportunities for multicultural engagement," writes Hammah, from Ghana. "I thoroughly enjoyed classes where professors encouraged diversity of thought among students in a spirit of mutual respect and intellectual curiosity. For example, in 'Economic Development in the Age of Globalization,' we had to sit next to a different student in every class. We were randomly paired up for debates, emboldened to contradict each other in classroom discussions, and motivated to pursue conversations outside of class, leading to many unexpected friendships."

### Nurturing the World's Future Leaders

Developing leadership skills is a priority of all female-exclusive colleges, and that starts with building strong networks among students as well as alumnae.

"Students definitely gain the leadership training and the critical thinking skills and the opportunities to really explore and develop their own identities out from under the umbrella of a male-dominated society," says Karen Zuffante Pabon, director of Wellesley's Slater International Center and an adviser for international students and scholars. "[At an all-women's institution], students have the freedom to be in a very stimulating and emotionally supportive environment and the opportunity to befriend other women from all over the world. I think that the idea of creating a community here among women, it may be a reason why international students may integrate a little bit better at women's colleges—because the whole idea of forming relationships and building a community is a common value in many cultures. And it's also a common value for women in general."

Wellesley senior Pelumi Botti, a native of Nigeria who grew up primarily in Mba-

bane, Swaziland, was attracted to Wellesley's "ethos" of building awareness of global issues and preparing women to serve in their communities. Botti appreciates the "intense debates" and "long conversations" she's had both in and out of the classroom, and also notes that she's benefitted from the college's strong alumnae network.

"Attending a women's college has definitely renewed my self confidence and personal ambition," says Botti, a senior majoring in international relations. "Being surrounded by many ambitious, self-assured, and talented women has definitely influenced me. I am not afraid to dream big dreams and pursue opportunities because I am a woman."

IE

**KAREN DOSS BOWMAN** is a freelance writer in Bridgewater, Virginia. Her last article for *International Educator* magazine was "Beyond Orientation," in the November/December 2015 issue.



CORT

APARTMENT. FURNITURE. HOUSEWARES.  
CHECK, CHECK AND CHECK.

Everything they need. Delivered and set up before they arrive. CORT makes it easy for international students to transition to life in the U.S. Let us find and furnish their apartments and spend your time and resources on what really matters: happy students.

Call 888-304-2112 or email [educationsales@cort.com](mailto:educationsales@cort.com).

© 2015 CORT. A Berkshire Hathaway Company.