



Women Students at Sophia

No. 39

1. Early Years as a Men's University

Sophia University is now one of the most popular universities among young Japanese women and well known in the business world for its female graduates, who have gone on to careers in business, teaching, and public service. In fact, today women outnumber men in the undergraduate student body (56% of undergraduate students were women as of May 1, 2014). While Sophia women have long been known for their outstanding language and critical thinking skills, Sophia is now gaining a good reputation for educating outstanding women in science and engineering, and in 2013 a Sophia undergraduate won the national "Miss Science and Technology" title in a contest that looked at both knowledge and beauty.

Given the strong presence of women on the contemporary Sophia campus, many are surprised when they learn that for the first 44 years of its existence Sophia was an all-male institution.

2. First Women Students Enter Sophia

In the postwar period, most of Japan's leading universities became co-educational institutions. Sophia, along with the National Defense Academy, was one of the last institutions to maintain single sex education. While coeducation spread very rapidly in Japan after the war, in the United States and Europe single-sex education, especially in institutions sponsored by Catholic orders, represented the main stream. This was true of all of the educational institutions run by the Jesuits, the Catholic order that founded Sophia University. Single sex education was the norm in most Catholic institutions for both philosophical and practical reasons. Philosophically Catholic leaders believed that there were differences in male and female roles in society, and that each gender group should receive education appropriate to their future roles. On a practical level, most Catholic universities were operated by religious orders, and those religious orders were all single sex organizations. The short announcement in the December 1, 1956 *Jôchi Daigaku Shinbun* that female transfer students were going to be admitted in April 1957, and female freshmen in April 1958 thus represented a major revolution, not only for Sophia but also for Catholic higher education. (While the female students who would enter in 1957 and 1958 were the first women in regular undergraduate programs, female students had been included in the night school classes run by the International Division since 1949).

What was it like for those first female pioneers at Sophia? In May 1957, only a month after the entrance of the first female students, the *Jôchi Daigaku Shinbun* published a roundtable discussion with three of the first four Sophia women, all of whom were graduates of Shirayuri Junior College for Women, asking them about their first impressions of the university, the



Women students play an active role on the Sophia campus today

teachers and the students. The headline of that special feature quoted one of the students, “It feels like we are guests in someone else’s house.” The women reported that they found most Sophia male students to be gentlemen, but not very aggressive. As for the faculty, they reported that some of the teachers seemed to be very uncomfortable with women in their classes. “We wish they would just ignore the fact that there are women in their classes, and teach in a normal way. Since we come from Shirayuri, the teachers all seem to think we are daughters of good families, and we can see them adjusting their neckties before they enter the classroom.”

3. The Road to Co-education—Decline in Applicants

Given the strong philosophical and practical reasons for single sex education, what led Sophia—and eventually other Catholic universities—to admit women? Father Klaus Luhmer, who was rector of the SJ House and a member of the board at the time the decision was taken, offers some clues to why and how Sophia came to admit the first women. Father Pedro Arrupe, S.J., was the Japanese Provincial and Father Oizumi Takashi was the Sophia president at the time the decision was made. Sophia was a small institution, with an admissions quota of 300 for its two faculties of humanities and economics. Up to 1952 there had been an average of about 800 applicants a year, but in 1953 this dropped to 500 and remained at that level. Fathers Arrupe, Oizumi and Luhmer together drew up a five-year plan for expansion, and top of their agenda was the admission of women, scheduled to take place in 1957.

Father Luhmer, writing about the role of President Oizumi, recalled, “it was the first faculty meeting after I became the rector of the SJ House. At that time there were only two faculties—humanities and economics—and they held their faculty meetings together. At that meeting, suddenly without any warning, Oizumi-sensei said, “There are many all-female colleges in Japan, but Sophia is the only all male institution. Isn’t it about time that we move to coeducation?” Shocked by this sudden proposal, many faculty members raised questions, and there was not a single person who supported the proposal.” At that point, Oizumi-sensei said, “Well—in a passive way—we will begin coeducation.” (愛はとこしえに:大泉孝先生思い出集、1988, p.111) [The “passive way” refers to the decision to remove “men only” 男子のみ from the application forms]. After reporting to Rome and getting somewhat reluctant approval from the SJ superior general, Sophia admitted four female transfer students from Shirayuri Junior College in April 1957.

4. From Special Support for Women to Promotion of Gender Equality

Following the admission of the first women, the university began the long process of creating a support system. In 1960 a dormitory for women was constructed, and in 1962 a Women’s Consultation Room was opened. Arashima Akiko, the daughter of Arashima Ikuma (brother of the artist Arashima Takero) was appointed as the director of the center. Using all she had learned during years of study in France, she organized activities for women students and also guided the women in manners appropriate for social occasions.

Once Sophia’s doors were open to female students, the



The Sophia Women Students' Room (at the right is Arishima Akiko)

number of applicants rose rapidly; by the mid-1960s, one-third of Sophia's students were women, and the women played an important role in transforming the university and its reputation.

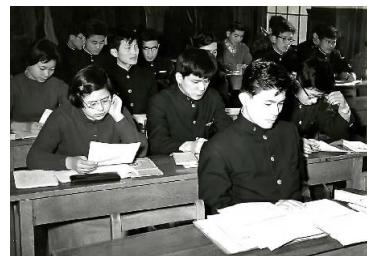
It was not long before women also joined the Sophia faculty, teaching physical education and languages. The

Russian language program was established the same year that women were admitted to the university, and Prof.

Galina Podstavina soon became the "symbol of the Russian Department faculty." In 1973 Dr. Tsurumi Kazuko, a world-renowned sociologist, joined the newly established Institute of International Relations, and in the same year Dr. Okazaki Sachiko joined the Chemistry Department in the Faculty of Science and Technology. Dr. Ogata Sadako served as a professor in the Institute of International Relations from 1973-1980, and in 1989 she was elected Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Studies, Sophia's first female dean. Dr. Ogata went on to serve as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and later as the president of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), establishing a world-wide reputation for international service.

In recent years the Faculty of Science and Technology has taken a lead in promoting gender equality. In 2009 that faculty received a three-year grant in the MEXT program for Promoting Women researchers, under the theme of "Support Women Researchers in a Global Society." The program has recruited foreign female scientists as mentors, and increased the number of female teaching staff, adjuncts and research assistants. At the final evaluation of this program in 2013, Sophia received MEXT's highest "S" rating, the first time a private university program received such a high evaluation.

As a result of continuous efforts spurred by this program, when the 2014 University rankings were published Sophia was ranked 5th in the percentage of female students in Science and Technology (23.8%). It is also ranked 4th in the education of women who have become announcers, and 12th in producing women who have become heads of business firms with more than 10 employees. So while there was some initial resistance to the admission of women to what had been an all-male institution, Sophia's women have made major contributions to the university's growth.



Classroom scene from 1959