

From 'Girl-of-the-Week' to now: A recent history of women at Emory

HEDE: 40 years later: the history of women at Emory

ALT HEDE: Emory women alumni reflect on past experiences

ALT: Women leaders at Emory: past to present

Content Warning: This article contains references to sexual assault.

Growing up in the '80s, former Student Government Association (SGA) President Laura Lewin (89C) felt like she could do “almost anything.” By her graduation from high school, she remembered women being in the workforce and experienced female staff and students — including herself — leading organizations at Emory University. She commented that if she had gone to Emory “possibly another 10 or 20 years” prior to her matriculation, she may have been more aware of whether there was female leadership at the University, but that it didn’t feel like a “big hurdle” during her time there.

However, it was not always this way. Lewin reflected on her early childhood, where women in “many areas” still needed their husband’s permission to open a credit card.

Before the '80s

From 1952 to 1970, “The Emory Wheel Girl-of-the-Week” [features](#), which sometimes displayed a girl’s height, weight and relationship status to the general population, were just some examples of portrayals of women at Emory. The Wheel archives expose more instances from that era, including sexualized [comics](#) of women willing to do “anything” for an A in a class and “[charity auctions](#)” of Emory women who were “slaves” to the highest bidder for a day.

However, Emory began to change. Since the '70s, more female students and faculty began serving in leadership roles. Furthermore, in the '80s and '90s, women were also involved in various staff positions at the University, even though the majority of Emory deans were men. [Quotas](#) on female enrollment — mandating only one woman be let in for every two men at Emory College of Arts and Sciences — persisted until 1971, but Emory now reports that [women](#) make up 57% of its undergraduate student body.

'80s and '90s

Lewin remembered that the previous female leaders of SGA made it feel easier for her to become involved in student government as a woman.

“There were three female SGA presidents in a row,” Lewin said. “Margot [Rogers (88C)], and then Theresa [Burris (88C)] and then me, so it didn’t feel like there was anything in my way.”

According to the Wheel’s former Editor-in-Chief Suzanne Morrissey (92C), the Wheel was “a boys’ club” before she arrived as editor. However, during her time at the Wheel, she recalled women working as assistant features editor and arts editor. Morrissey described the women working for student publications as “formidable thinkers,” allowing the Wheel to win both of the top collegiate journalism awards for the first time in the paper’s history.

Morrissey, who was the Wheel’s [first](#) female editor-in-chief, and Lewin, among the first women to hold SGA presidency, credited previous generations for paving the way for increased gender inclusivity on campus.

"It's been the women before me, the women of the '70s, [who] have paved the way for women of my generation," Morrissey said.

Former Student Programming Council Chair Michele Riley (91C) recalled hearing about how female rights and responsibilities had progressed from the past generation to her collegiate years. She specifically remembered how former Assistant Dean and Director of Summer Programs Rosemary Magee (82G) would talk about the obstacles of balancing motherhood and employment.

“Rosemary’s point was, ‘Well, at least [women] have the option now to work in what [they] want,’” Riley said. “That wasn’t true for when she was younger, and she always thought Emory was a very welcoming place for that.”

However, Emory’s increased representation of women did not eliminate the misogyny or gender-based discrimination on campus during the ’80s and ’90s, according to Riley. She recalled instances of inappropriate behavior from professors toward female students.

Riley believes women are less tolerant toward such behavior today.

“Today’s young women ... when we get them in the workplace, they experience something and they say, ‘That’s wrong,’ they call it out immediately,” Riley said. “We did not do that.”

Morrissey also discussed an instance during her time at the Wheel where two male fraternity members came to the Wheel offices and pressured the staff to not run a story about an alleged sexual assault committed by a member of their fraternity. She described the situation as “scary” but ultimately decided to publish the story.

Morrissey remembered feeling the presence of the Wheel staffers standing behind her during this incident, which ultimately led the fraternity members to leave the Wheel members alone. Similarly, Morrissey said that she felt a general sense of “camaraderie” with members of Emory’s other student publications, such as The Spoke. She especially had a “special” connection with the female students working in publications, who “enjoyed” seeing each other.

“Nobody was competing with each other,” Morrissey said. “We were all trying to see each other succeed and make sure that we were all doing our best work, to lift those publications. And so anyone's success was all of our success.”

Morrissey also looked toward the next generations, noting the impact women in the past have on the present and future.

“I’m very grateful that my mom’s generation paved the way for us, and hopefully our generation is paving the way for you,” Morrissey said.

Emory in 2024

Today, women make up [57%](#) of Emory’s undergraduate student body and the [majority](#) of Emory’s school’s deans are women, which is a stark contrast to 40 years ago, when women made up 43.9% of the total student [population](#).

Former College Council President Neha Murthy (24C) reflected on her experiences attending Emory in an era with more female representation, especially with regards to the mentoring she received from older women working at Emory.

“There were certain skills that only I could have learned from another woman,” Murthy said.

Murthy added that it is important to see female power in “every facet and every aspect” of life and that representation and mentorship has impacted her future.

While women are still fighting for increased recognition for their work, Murthy said her female mentors have helped her recognize and celebrate her accomplishments.

“I hope down the road women in power can feel confident and get recognized for all their initiatives and everything that they have done without having to fight extra to get that recognition,” Murthy said.

If you or someone you know experienced sexual assault, you can access Emory’s Department of Title IX at 404-727-0541 and the Office of Respect’s hotline 24/7 at (470) 270-5360. You can reach the RAINN National Sexual Assault hotline 24/7 at (800) 656-4673. You can reach the Atlanta Grady Rape Crisis

Center crisis hotline 24/7 at (404) 616-4861 and the Decatur Day League Sexual Assault Care and Prevention crisis hotline 24/7 at (404) 377-1428.

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Otter recordings:

- Morrissey: https://otter.ai/u/nLjflaylbXQ23Egrwy3enHDpRjI?utm_source=copy_url
- Lewin: https://otter.ai/u/FMPY345nIUM54JNjICagOKVnDb8?utm_source=copy_url
- Jackson/Riley: https://otter.ai/u/viJJJP2QWI_PRCaUHm0s_6jjDP4?utm_source=copy_url
- Neha: https://otter.ai/u/XJCC0xUWpJiDkRsFMnhZZi5h63g?utm_source=copy_url

quotes:

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- Riley additionally articulated how women at the University helped shape her future. “I’ve worked through having children, I took five years off with my kids, but always wanted to get back to work,” Riley said. “And maybe at some level, it was because there was something I learned from the women who were working at Emory, through having their families and stuff.”
- “I really think Emory was a very special place,” Laura Lewin (89C), former Student Government Association (SGA) President and Dobbs Hall Resident Advisor, said.
- “it is a different world today than it was back in 1991,” Jackson said.
- “Back in 1974, and I was six years old at the time, women in many areas still needed her husband’s permission or husband to sign off on a credit card for them,” Lewin said.
- Riley additionally drew a parallel between the issues women discussed at Emory in the ‘90s and what members of her workplace discuss today.
- Lewin attributes part of her mindset to the era she grew up in. “I was lucky that I grew up in the 80s and I fe[el] like women could do almost anything,”
- “two very large fraternity brothers from that fraternity when they heard from their friends that we were going to be reporting on the incident came to the fifth floor one night and were trying to physically intimidate us to not run it,” but that the entire staff came out and the frat guys ended up leaving after seeing everybody (“And I could feel all the other people on the staff standing behind me.”)
- “I feel like she was, for me, a very strong female leader at a time before there weren’t a lot of female Deans and a lot of female leaders outside of the faculty,” Morrissee said of Nancy Seideman (head of emory news and info, just retired?) .
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