

Dear President Hillman (Beth, if I may),

Thank you for explaining so clearly Mills' current progress toward working out its new partnership with Northeastern University when you spoke with us at our 50th and 51st Mills Reunion.

At the "Whither Mills?" discussion session on Saturday, alums from the Classes of 1970 and 1971 discussed our questions, our ideas, and our hopes about Mills' future. Obviously, you have been hearing a lot of opposition and criticism from the leaders and the 1990's factions of the AAMC. We disagree with them. As you evaluate the whole range of opinions within the alumnae body, I hope you will factor in our opposition to their contentious and litigious approach to Mills' crisis. **Our group, with very few exceptions, endorses Mills' partnership with Northeastern as an exciting opportunity to innovate, reach new students, and ensure the survival of Mills College.¹**

Our discussion group included artists, writers, psychiatrists, psychologists, business people, and a range of people who had worked within secondary and higher education, including an alum who had written about gender equity and mergers and alums who had

¹ One group member did add a caveat: "Although I see Mills' merger with Northeastern University as a done deal, and therefore futile to oppose, I cannot say that I "endorse.[it] as an exciting opportunity to innovate, reach new students, and ensure the survival of Mills College." (2nd paragraph last sentence) I feel cautiously optimistic that Mills will survive in some fashion, but I fear that it will lose much of what made and makes it such an important place for educating and developing women of substance."

worked on anti-racism training and LGBTQ and other equity issues. At our discussion group alums who had attended or spoken at Northeastern provided new and encouraging information about the Mills-Northeastern partnership. Here are the highlights of our group's discussion:

1. NOT SURPRISED IN MARCH: We were not surprised when Mills' long-term financial crisis reached a breaking point. We have been reading about it for decades, and we know a number of recent presidents resorted to drastic cost-cutting budgets.
2. WOMEN'S COLLEGES HAVE BEEN DECREASING DRAMATICALLY IN THE LAST HALF CENTURY- Given financial pressures and applicants' preference for coeducation, many of Mills' peer colleges have reached the same crisis point—and failed to survive. Change is needed for Mills to live on as a college. Once upon a time Mills alumnae said “Better DEAD than COED,” but now we say “BETTER NOT DEAD.” We want Mills alive and kicking!
3. REGRET PAST DECISIONS-We regret that, after we graduated, the ongoing financial crisis pushed leaders at Mills to cut the college's recruiting and publicity budgets. Regional reps were abolished and Mills went from being a selective national and international educational option to being seen as a regional and less well-known college. We understand that the pandemic and diplomatic tensions have cut off chances for international students to go to Mills, and we hope Mills will return to its former international and nationally diverse population in the future.

We generally applaud the College's commitment to affordability and working toward broadened access to higher education among underserved groups and first-generation college attendees. Low tuition did not attract more full pay applicants. 98% on financial aid strikes us as a financially untenable strategy for Mills' survival. In the future, we hope that with a coeducational applicant pool of students, the college will retain its commitment to broad access and solid financial aid at the same time it brings Mills' ratio of full pay students into line with the practices of more financially stable colleges. Alums in our group who worked at similar educational institutions to Mills have watched their educational institutions bring deferred maintenance costs and generous financial aid policies into their institution's budget models to achieve financial equilibrium, and the process of making cuts elsewhere and explaining them to the faculty was difficult. In the future we hope Mills will attract students across the economic spectrum without spending more on financial aid than it can afford. We also hope Mills' partnership with Northeastern with its close ties to the non-profit and business communities, will result in more Mills students being able to finance their educations with outside scholarships, internships, and similar programs. Northeastern and Mills could partner with Mt. Holyoke where Google funded mentoring programs and universal design models of education to encourage more women to study computer science and gain employment in the technology sector.

4. WE APPLAUD THE FACT THAT MILLS HAS STRUGGLED TO FIGHT ITS OWN PAST HOMOPHOBIA. WE ARE CONCERNED THAT ITS SUCCESS HAS MOVED IT TO ONE OF THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGES OF LGBT ATTENDEES AMONG ITS PEERS-Our group has expressed varying degrees of comfort with Mills

as it is today, but in general we applaud its openness and safe space for LGBT students. Alums among us have been part of the struggle to fight homophobia in education, and we are proud Mills has been a leader in anti-racism and providing a gay-friendly campus.

Many in our age group have had little direct experience with gender non-conformity, trans people, pronoun declarations, and queer theory. Members of our group expressed the view that 58% of the entering Mills class identifying as LGBTQ may pose a marketing problem for Mills in the future. A majority LGBTQ educational niche, while welcoming to some, may be off-putting to other applicants. The stigma that Smith and other colleges have faced in the recruiting and college application process must have hurt Mills' ability to recruit international students and many other students, too. The Trump era's spread of hate and violence against all kinds of minorities is deplorable to us, and we wish all colleges and universities would commit to equity and respect for all genders. But Mills has moved to the edges of its peer group and that concerns some among us as a barrier to reviving our enrollment. One member of our discussion group writes that "I think the reluctance of many potential Mills students may result from the fear that they would be entering a closed social and political environment with nearly 2/3 of the student body identifying as sexual minorities. If there had been large enough pool of academically talented LGBTQ applicants who wished to attend a college where they formed the majority, however, Mills would not be in the current position of lowered selectivity and academic standards. So I really do see this as a marketing issue above all."

Mills graduates of our era have for years spoken out for more diversity of race,

ethnicity, social standing, country of origin, and sexual orientation in our student body and faculty, and now we hope the proportions of all those groups at Mills could more closely reflect their percentages in the general U.S. population.

5. MILLS MUST MAKE A NEW CASE FOR INNOVATIVE EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION ON A BLENDED WOMEN'S COLLEGE-URBAN UNIVERSITY

MODEL-The case that historically women's colleges have made to recruit applicants includes promises of support, creativity, and opportunities to be taken seriously in a pro-woman environment. Since our classes left Mills, women's colleges often make their case for women's education based upon how many more women's college graduates have gone to grad and professional schools and become governors and CEOs compared to their peers who went to coeducational colleges. This familiar argument for women's colleges as better launching pads for women does not usually factor in the elite social class advantages earlier generations of women's college grads had over their sisters who attended coeducational colleges (which was not true of all Mills' high achievers), but there is plenty of evidence that women who attend colleges like Mills gain a tremendous advantage by getting a liberal arts education in an egalitarian environment with more women professors and more leaders committed to women's advancement.

In recent years Mills has built upon this argument, but despite the good outcomes, in an environment of growing hostility toward women-centered institutions and feminism, the stigma of being a single sex college still seems to have hurt Mills' enrollment. Colleges like Mt. Holyoke and Mills have been flexible in welcoming resumers and junior

college transfers which seems like a valuable trend, especially as Mills holds onto its commitment to multiculturalism and economic diversity as core mission goals.

Northeastern has a commitment to multiculturalism and diversity, but has been less vocal about gender equity. We believe in the academically rigorous supportive haven model that still exists at Mills, but how can it be adapted to coeducation?

A coeducational and diverse Mills at Northeastern with a commitment to respect for all genders presents a rebranding and mission blending challenge. Northeastern is likely to be a chillier climate for cultivating women's leadership; how often are women elected to leadership positions on their campus? Is there much of a residential life program for encouraging conflict resolution, respect for all genders, and anti-racism? One of our group raised the question of safety for women when more men come on campus—lighting, date rape education, and mutual respect are not taken for granted by all 18 year olds. Climate programs to achieve equity, mutual respect, and safety from sexual harassment need to be explicit goals in the revised missions.

Northeastern offers a wonderful educational smorgasbord, but it is notably less advanced in the arts than Mills. Can arts immersion semesters be an innovation Mills can offer or could an immersion in Oakland or California history with the Oakland Museum of California History be a Mills specialty? Northeastern has a much larger student body and has had some success at fostering debate and disagreement. College campuses all over the country are still struggling with having debates from differing viewpoints, so perhaps Mills and Northeastern will provide a bicoastal forum for exchanges of viewpoints. We hope Mills' 800-1000 or more students will not be

swallowed up in a sea of Northeastern's 15,550 undergraduates, and we hope the partnership will allow Mills to remain independent, guided by its own strong leaders. We applaud this partnership as a chance for Mills to try new ways of teaching and to commit to shared urban studies and community service projects. Northeastern University has a history of thinking clearly and creatively about how students grow up in a John Dewey sense, "learning by doing." Internships build in a new kind of learning and provide assistance with students' after college transition. Though getting a job at the end should not be the only measure of a college education, we see great value in a college experience spent becoming a new person by growing up in an intellectual and culturally rich environment, interacting and working with people from around the world and from different worlds within the U.S. We hope Northeastern's experiential model of education can be a tremendous redefining tool for Mills.

We hope for the best results from this new partnership, and we thank you for keeping your eyes on the prize, the survival of Mills College, throughout this grueling and contentious year.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Dalton, on behalf of the members of the Class of 1970 and 71 who attended the "Whither Mills" session at Mills' 2021 Reunion

Elizabeth Ambuhl
Dayna Cole
Debra Davis Hartridge
Pamela Ravin Jacobs
Roberta C. Johnson
Natalie Mallinckrodt

Marsha Matsuura
Elizabeth Ruderman Miller
Susan Schumacher Morris
Julia Harby Murray
Alice Powers Pulliam
MaryBelle Bloch Royer
Barbara Larkin Stocker
Deborah Zambianco