Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood

By LOUISE STORY

Cynthia Liu is precisely the kind of high achiever Yale wants: smart (1510 SAT), disciplined (4.0 grade point average), competitive (finalist in Texas oratory competition), musical (pianist), athletic (runner) and altruistic (hospital volunteer). And at the start of her sophomore year at Yale, Ms. Liu is full of ambition, planning to go to law school.

So will she join the long tradition of famous Ivy League graduates? Not likely. By the time she is 30, this accomplished 19-year-old expects to be a stay-at-home mom.

"My mother's always told me you can't be the best career woman and the best mother at the same time," Ms. Liu said matter-of-factly. "You always have to choose one over the other."

At Yale and other top colleges, women are being groomed to take their place in an ever more diverse professional elite. It is almost taken for granted that, just as they make up half the students at these institutions, they will move into leadership roles on an equal basis with their male classmates.

There is just one problem with this scenario: many of these women say that is not what they want.

Many women at the nation's most elite colleges say they have already decided that they will put aside their careers in favor of raising children. Though some of these students are not planning to have children and some hope to have a family and work full time, many others, like Ms. Liu, say they will happily play a traditional female role, with motherhood their main commitment.

Much attention has been focused on career women who leave the work force to rear children. What seems to be changing is that while many women in college two or three decades ago expected to have full-time careers, their daughters, while still in college, say they have already decided to suspend or end their careers when they have children.

"At the height of the women's movement and shortly thereafter, women were much more firm in their expectation that they could somehow combine full-time work with child rearing," said Cynthia E. Russett, a professor of American history who has taught at Yale since 1967. "The women today are, in effect, turning realistic."

Dr. Russett is among more than a dozen faculty members and administrators at the most exclusive institutions who have been on campus for

Continued on Page A18
Ivy League Women Set a Career Path to Motherhood

Continued From Page A1

decades and who said in interviews that they had noticed the changing attitude.

Many students say staying home is not a shocking idea among their friends. Shannon Flynn, an 18-year-old freshman at Harvard, says many of her friends do not want to work full time. “Most probably do feel like me, maybe even envision staying at home to not work at all,” said Ms. Flynn, who plans to work part time after graduation. “I’m not sure if that’s how I’ll do it, but I hate the idea of having a job because she has worked so hard in school.”

“Men really aren’t put in that position,” she said.

Andrea A. Abasa, a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania who hopes to become a lawyer, says she, too, is “starting to see that this is just another option for women.”

“I’ve seen the difference between kids who did have their mother stay at home and kids who didn’t, and it’s kind of like an obvious difference when you look at it,” said Ms. Abasa, who plans to work part time, and about half want to stop work for at least a few years.

Two of the women interviewed said they hoped to eventually start a family and stay home with the children while they pursued their careers. Two others said they would most likely want to stay home, depending on where their career took them.

The women said that pursuing a rigorous college education was worth the time and money because it would help position them to work in meaningful part-time jobs when they are ready to return to full-time work or just to have good jobs when their children leave home.

In recent years, elite colleges have emphasized the important roles they expect their students — men and women — to play in society. For example, during this year, Stanford University and Princeton University, welcomed thousands of students to the university to prepare young people to take up positions in the 21st century. Of course, the word “leadership” connotes something more than just leadership and C.E.O.’s, but I want to stress that my idea of a leader is much broader than that.

She listed education, medicine and engineering as other areas where students could consider leadership positions.

In an e-mail response to a question, a student who wrote, “There is nothing inconsistent with being a leader and a stay-at-home parent. Someone who has the time to be with her children when she has known who have done this have had a very positive impact on their communities.”

Yet the likelihood that so many young women will follow suit is a daunting prospect for those who believe that highly trained, academically powered careers presents a conundrum.

“It really does raise this question for all of us and for the country: what is the impact of these economic and other opportunities for women, what kind of return do we expect from a woman who has spent so much time and effort?” said Dr. McGraw, director of undergraduate studies at Harvard who has served as dean for coeducation to the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. It is a complicated issue and one

Groomed for great careers, but preferring to stay home.

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