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 FEATURE | fall 2005

Too Many Women in College?

Suddenly, the media—and Laura Bush—are concerned about an education gender gap. Funny, no one was scared when men were on top.

by Phyllis Rosser

Although American women still struggle for parity in many arenas, we have outpaced men in at least one: undergraduate college education. Currently, 57.4 percent of bachelor's degrees in the United States are earned by women, 42.6 percent by men. This is an almost exact reversal from 1970, when 56.9 percent of college graduates were males and 43.1 percent females.

We should be celebrated for this landmark achievement, but instead it has engendered fear. Read the headlines: “Falling Male College Matriculation an Alarming Trend,” or “Admissions Officers Weigh a Heretical Idea: Affirmative Action for Men.” Notice, too, that a major focus of first lady Laura Bush's new anti-gang task force is education for boys. As she's been quoted, “The statistics are pretty alarming. Girls are going to college much more than boys.”

Few worried when college students were two-thirds men. But as early as February 1999, *U.S. News & World Report* predicted that the rising tide of women college grads could close the salary gap and move women into positions of power as heads of corporations, presidents of universities and political leaders. At the other extreme, the article suggested, college education might become devalued—considered “a foolhardy economic decision”—as has happened in other fields after women begin to predominate.

Still rare at the top

What *U.S. News* failed to mention was that women are still a rare presence at the top ranks of the corporate and professional world despite earning more college degrees than men for 23 years. Women undertake stronger academic programs than men in high school, and receive higher average grades than men in both high school and college, but haven't been able to translate that success into equitable money and power. Consider these disparities as well:

- Women currently earn nearly 59 percent of master's degrees, but men outstrip women in advanced degrees for business, engineering and computer-science degrees—fields which lead to much higher-paying jobs than education, health and psychology, the areas where women predominate.

- Despite women's larger numbers as undergrads and in master's programs, men outnumber women in earning doctorates (54 percent) and professional degrees (53 percent).
- This year, the number of women applying to medical school outpaced men for the second time, but they are only predicted to be 33 percent of doctors by 2010.
- Women comprise nearly half of the students entering law schools, but they're miles from parity as law partners, professors and judges.

Tests don't tell the whole tale

Women may lose a step on the career ladder even before they enter college. That's because, despite their greater number of bachelor's and master's degrees, women remain at a disadvantage in college admissions testing - which affects their acceptance at elite schools. The main purpose of the SAT - on which women averaged 44 points lower than men last year - is to predict first-year grades. However, it consistently underpredicts the college performance of women, who earn higher college grades than men.

Women's lower scores on the SAT have been shown to arise from several factors biased toward male performance, including the fact that it's a timed test and rewards guessing—and men tend to be more confident and risk-taking than women in such test situations. Also, the SAT puts many of the questions in a male context (such as sports), which can further lower female confidence about knowing the material.

In an attempt to even the gender playing field, a writing section that includes language questions and an essay was added to the SAT this year, after the University of California insisted that the test be more attuned to the skills necessary for college success. This may raise women's SAT scores somewhat, since writing tests are an area in which they have traditionally outperformed males.

Lower SAT scores keep qualified women from both attending the most competitive schools and from receiving National Merit Scholarships and other awards based on PSAT and SAT scores. The test biases against women then continue in graduate education, with such instruments as the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) and Law School Admissions Test (LSAT).

Thus, women have yet to predominate at the most prestigious colleges and universities, where graduates are tracked toward top leadership positions in society. With enormous numbers of both sexes applying to these schools, the admissions offices can choose their gender ratio. In 2005, men outnumbered women at all the Ivy League schools except Brown and Columbia. Women are also significantly outnumbered at universities specializing in engineering and physical science, such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge and California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

Affirmative action—for men?

The greater percentage of women earning bachelor's degrees has given rise to some reactionary theories explaining why. Conservative analyst Christina Hoff Sommers insists the gap takes root in the more “girl-friendly” elementary school environment where boys are turned off to learning.

In *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), Hoff Sommers claims that schoolboys are “routinely regarded as protosexists, potential harassers and perpetrators of gender inequity” who “live under a cloud of censure.”

Even higher-education policy analyst Tom Mortensen, who has a special concern with underrepresented populations in higher education, also sees the college gender gap as part of a larger societal problem for men and boys. Mortensen says K-12 teachers, 75 percent of whom are women, are not providing the role models and learning styles boys need. Of course, this was never an issue during the decades when college graduates were mainly men, and hasn't drawn much notice since the end of the Civil War—the time when women began their continuing predominance as elementary school teachers.

If these theories seem to spring from a blame-the-women viewpoint, there is a legitimate concern about the decline in male graduates at private colleges, where the gap has been greatest (although public universities have also been affected). Admissions officers worry that their colleges' value will be lowered by an imbalance of female students: The larger the female majority, some say, the less likely either males or females will want to apply.

Speaking at a College Board conference several years ago, admissions officers agreed that a 60-40 female-to-male gender ratio was their upper limit. After that, said former Macalester College president Michael McPherson, “students will take notice.” Small private colleges are now using what can only be called “male affirmative action” to increase male enrollment: actively recruiting men by emphasizing their science, math and engineering courses, adding sports programs (in violation of Title IX), sending extra mailings designed to attract men and even calling men to remind them of the admissions deadline.

Will Shrinking Federal Aid Affect the Gender Gap?

Women may outnumber men on college campuses, but they also need more financial help to get there—and for this upcoming school year, that aid might be in jeopardy. That's because the Department of Education (DOE) is using new data to help calculate the “expected family contribution”—the amount of money a family could be reasonably expected to afford for college tuition. This helps determine how much federal grant or loan money a student can qualify for.

The DOE has used 1988 state tax information in their formula for 16 years, since the IRS hadn't released newer data. But when 2001 figures became available—showing that taxes had decreased

“Probably no one will admit it, but I know lots of places try to get some gender balance by having easier admissions standards for boys than for girls,” said Columbia University Teachers College president Arthur Levine to The New York Times national correspondent Tamar Lewin. Robert Massa, vice president of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Penn., has said that the school now evaluates prospective male students less on grades and more on measures where they typically do better, such as SAT scores. Adds Goucher College admissions vice president Barbara Fritze, “Men are being admitted to schools they never got into before, and offered financial aid they hadn’t gotten before.”

Massa reported that the number of first-year males at Dickinson rose from 36 percent to 43 percent in 2001 after they took affirmative action toward men, who were admitted with lower grades but comparable SAT scores. Women, meanwhile, had to be much better than men to make the cut: Nearly 62 percent of the women accepted to the school ranked in the top 10 percent of their high school class, compared to 42 percent of the men.

This new form of affirmative action, even if begun with all good intentions, could lead to bad college-admissions policy. What if a university decides it doesn’t just want more men in attendance, but more white men? The whole notion of affirmative action as a way to help disadvantaged populations succeed could be turned on its

over the 12-year span—it looked on paper as if families could afford to spend more on college.

However, congressional Democrats and other education advocates argued that lumping together years of gradual tax declines would give an unfair illusion that families suddenly had extra money in the bank. The use of the new data was blocked for a time, but last year Congress went ahead with the legally mandated formula update, prompted by concerns about the growing cost of Pell grants, the largest federal student grant program. The New York Times has estimated that, on average, families with the same income and assets as they had in 2000 will now have to pay an extra \$1,749 for higher education this year.

Women, unfortunately, will likely bear the brunt of the cut in aid. Overall, half of women in college receive federal aid, compared to 42 percent of men. According to Melanie Corrigan, assistant director of the Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education, women are more often eligible for aid because they are more likely to return to school as a single parent and because, in general, they earn less than men. Additionally, more women apply for financial aid.

While everyone receiving financial aid from programs determined by the DOE formula—Pell grants, subsidized loans and some state or institutional assistance—could feel the pinch, the change might do the most damage to those families earning \$35,000 to \$55,000 per year. They are often on the cusp of being eligible for Pell grants and other aid for lower-income students.

Experts in the field do not predict sweeping dropouts or a widening of the college gender gap due to the new calculation, and they point out that other economic factors should rebalance the formula in the future. But for now, financially struggling

head.

women—and men—will have to work even harder to stay in school.
—Kathleen Bishop

The income gap

The real reason behind the undergrad gender gap may have much less to do with one's sex and more to do with income, race and class.

Jacqueline King, director of the Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education in Washington, D.C., decided that media stories about the decline of white male enrollment didn't intuitively jibe with what she saw happening, so she took a closer look at college student data, analyzing it by sex, age, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. She found the gender gap in college enrollment for students 18 to 24 years of age in 1995-96 occurred among low-income students of all racial/ethnic groups except Asian Americans.

In fact, since 1995, many more women than men from households making less than \$30,000 attend college. The latest available data, from 2003-04, shows there is an even smaller percentage of low-income males attending college than there were in 1995, and they are from every racial/ethnic group. African American and Native American students have the largest gender gaps—males comprise just 37 percent of all low-income African American students and 36 percent of low-income Native Americans. Low-income Hispanic men reach a slightly higher 39 percent, and low-income white males 41 percent (a drop from 46 percent in 1995). Asian Americans have the smallest gender gap, with 47 percent of that group's low-income college students being male.

Middle-income (\$30,000-\$70,000) male students maintained gender parity with females 10 years ago, but since then the numbers have dropped somewhat. This may mean that fewer men from the lower end of this income bracket are attending college, says Eugene Anderson, senior research associate at the American Council on Education.

At the highest income level (\$70,000 or more), though, men and women in all ethnic groups attend college in nearly equal numbers.

No studies have been done to determine why more low-income women than men attend college, but there are theories. Economist Lester Thurow suggests that low-income men have been lured to the comfortable salaries of mechanical maintenance jobs. Low-income women, on the other hand, don't have such opportunities, and without a college degree, see themselves getting trapped in low-pay sales or service jobs, says King. Also, more men than women work in computer support or high-tech factories— jobs that don't require bachelor's degrees.

Overall, an increasing number of poor and working-class people are dropping out of college because of such reasons as escalating tuition and the attraction of high-paying factory work, according to a May piece in *The New York Times* ("The College Dropout Boom: Diploma's Absence Strands Many in the Working Class"). Harvard president

Lawrence H. Summers goes so far as to call this widening of the education gap between rich and poor our “most serious domestic problem”—and recent changes in federal grant formulas may exacerbate it even further (see sidebar above).

Uprising: minorities and older women

On the bright side, ethnic minorities have made impressive gains as college students since 1976, increasing their percentage in the total student body from 10 percent to 23 percent. Minority men’s share of all bachelor’s degrees has gone from 5 percent to 9 percent. But, again, minority women have outstripped them, more than doubling their share of bachelor’s degrees, from 5 percent to 14 percent of the total degrees awarded.

Not only is that statistic a contributing factor to the overall gender gap, but another contributing factor is that women are the majority of older (25+) students—and that demographic has been returning to college in record numbers. The “oldsters” now make up 27 percent of the undergraduate student body, and 61 percent of older students are women. King found that many of these students were African American or Latina, attending community colleges to improve future earnings in health-related fields.

“This story is not one of male failure, or even lack of opportunity,” says King, “but rather one of increased academic opportunity and success among females and minorities.” Indeed, there has been no decline in bachelor’s degrees awarded to men; the numbers awarded to women have simply increased.

Feminists should continue to be concerned about encouraging low-income and minority students to attend college, using the current momentum to give these problems the attention they deserve. But in the meantime, we must remain vigilant about attempts to roll back our educational gains. The fact is, we’re a long way from threatening corporate America, so don’t put the onus on women. Maybe it’s just time to let men try to catch up to us, for a change.