

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

For Women on Campuses, Access Doesn't Equal Success

October 2, 2011

By MaryAnn Baenninger, President of the College of St. Benedict.

The influence of gender is lurking on our campuses—in classrooms, in residence halls, on the bleachers at athletic events. It follows students as they study abroad, and it is the elephant in the room when students are learning to lead. The gender-laden experiences of our students have unanticipated consequences in their own lives and in society as a whole, yet those of us in higher education generally behave as if we live in a "postgender" world.

Women and men arrive at our campuses with different self-concepts. Their orientation toward academic work and leadership differs, and they participate differently in what we call engaged learning. Research suggests that college has little impact on these differences, or on helping students take them into account. That comes as no surprise to people who spend time with college students. What is surprising is that we pay little systematic attention to this issue.

That's too bad, because our goal, as educators, in exploring questions of gender should be to ferret out what works (and doesn't work), both pedagogically and socially, for men and women in college. Ideally we would explore ways to support positive outcomes and tendencies and to encourage development, awareness, and growth; yet most institutions fail even to study the issue.

I hope it is clear that I am not making assertions about individual women and individual men; any student may have a markedly different profile than the norm. However, consider the following, which reflect conclusions from national data and are supported by research at my own institution, the College of St. Benedict, and at Saint John's University, our partner institution:

- Women underestimate their abilities and express lower levels of self-confidence than their abilities suggest. Men overestimate their abilities and express higher levels of confidence than their abilities warrant. This difference arrives with them as first-year students and leaves with them as seniors. When I talk about this, or I hear researchers describe this finding, the audience always chuckles (boys will be boys, after all).

Those conclusions lead some people to worry about women, and some to disparage men. But the issue is more complicated. Both of those profiles have some good attributes and some bad attributes, and there is an optimal level of self-confidence to ensure the best results. Underestimating one's abilities probably results in more time in academic preparation and a more team-oriented approach to problem solving. Higher levels of self-confidence probably support innovative practices and may help one nail a job interview.

Men in college spend significantly more time in leisure activities (especially, for example, video-game play and athletic pursuits) than do women. College women are hyper-scheduled participants

in co-curricular activities.

Like my first example, this information yields chuckles. But if we look more deeply, important questions arise. Is there some happy medium that we could help our students achieve? Stressing greater attention to academic pursuits for men and more leisure time for women could better prepare students for work-life balance after college. Consider the consequences for the work force and for families if we are producing a generation of women who think they must work constantly at work and at home to achieve a baseline level of success—and a generation of men who think that they needn't work too hard to be successful.

- Women have higher GPA's than do men—when they enter and leave college—even when the sexes show equivalent aptitude on standardized tests. Is there absolutely something good about having the very highest GPA one can get? Women who work hard to achieve this should be applauded. But we need to understand better the reasons why men's GPA's are lower. Is it simply because they don't study as much on average, or is it in some cases because the learning takes precedence over the grade, something that we strive for as educators? Or could it be that men take more (good) academic risks?

Clearly, our conclusions about gender must be nuanced, and we would be wise to suspend assumptions about whether women or men are doing better or worse. But there are other areas where nuance isn't necessary to see that we could be more aggressive as educators in challenging gender-stereotyped choices. For example, in a country with a scientific and technological brain drain, there continues to be a pipeline problem for women in mathematics and the physical sciences.

In a country where the health-care and education systems are deeply challenged, men continue to be underrepresented in the important fields of nursing and teaching. Yet one rarely hears of national efforts to engage more men in these fields.

In an ever-shrinking world, men show significantly less interest than women in studying abroad, interacting with other cultures, and learning a second language. Is this why women exhibit greater acceptance of diversity than do men?

In our current economic and political crisis, women remain in the minority in the field of economics, and they show markedly less interest in running for political office than do men. They do more of the background work of leadership and hold fewer titular leadership positions than men. This is true in college, and after college, including in the field of higher education. We need all forms of leadership, but we don't necessarily want approaches to leadership to remain highly correlated with gender.

As I reflect on these issues, I think about what has changed in my lifetime, and whether we are doing any better with gender. In the United States today, women have access to just about every educational opportunity and every career. But access doesn't guarantee outcomes. A gendered culture, mostly in unconscious ways, limits women's expectations for themselves and our

expectations for them.

And while we were focusing on gaining access for girls and women, we neglected the needs of boys and men. We didn't plan well for the consequences of a society that taught one sex that it had to work harder to gain access, and the other sex that access was guaranteed. We find ourselves surprised each time we learn that the educational system is not serving boys and men as well as it might. We've barely begun to explore higher education's role in finding a balance that is good for *all* of our students and good for our country, and it is time we got started.

## Saving the 'Lost Boys' of Higher Education

(October 2, 2011)

By Robert B. Smith, partner in the Boston office of the law firm LeClairRyan

In J.M. Barrie's novel *Peter Pan*, Peter explains to Wendy that the "lost boys" are toddlers who fell out of their prams at Kensington Gardens and were whisked away to Neverland.

"Are none of the others girls?" asks Wendy.

"Oh, no," Peter says. "Girls, you know, are much too clever to fall out of their prams."

Literary scholars can debate whether Peter was simply currying favor with Wendy or making a wry observation about the differences between the sexes. But there is no doubt that today, Barrie's clever phrase for those wayward youths has become a synonym for a very 21st-century phenomenon: underachieving males.

Higher-education officials have been wringing their hands about our own "lost boys" for years. And yet the flip-flopped gender gap continues to widen: In April 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau released data showing that, for the first time, women have sailed past men in obtaining both bachelor's degrees and advanced college degrees. The report sparked some discussion about today's shifting gender roles and the burgeoning ranks of stay-at-home dads, but over all, much of the commentary has had a matter-of-fact tone. Thanks to the likes of Richard Whitmire's 2010 book *Why Boys Fail* and *The Atlantic's* exhaustive cover story "The End of Men," Americans, it seems, are getting used to the idea that men are on the decline.

If the United States simply accepts that males will continue to lag behind their female counterparts in academic interest and performance, the consequences will be profound. This is no abstract issue: Ultimately, it could lead to a country in which millions of young men live with their parents and work lousy jobs with few or no benefits, and in which a class of highly educated, professionally engaged women is expected to support underemployed husbands.

The issue is not whether well-educated males should stay at home and take care of the kids. Today's "modern family" can work when it is a function of new opportunities, rather than a forced adjustment to limited horizons. If a husband can stay at home and run a successful online

business while his wife practices medicine, great. But if he struggled in academics, dropped out of high school, and resents his wife's power and prestige, it will be a raw deal for all involved.

So why the inaction on the so-called lost boys? One effort seems to have stalled amid apparent lack of interest: a proposal to establish a White House Council on Boys to Men, spearheaded by the author Warren Farrell, who has published several books about gender relations and what he views as the myth of male social advantage.

The lack of progress may stem from our sense that males hold all the cards—an impression undiminished by the abundant research documenting their struggles, which affect boys and men regardless of race or socioeconomic status. Contemplated in the abstract, the image of hard-working women giving a bunch of masculine underachievers their comeuppance after eons of patriarchy might seem just. But the realities of the new gender gap are nothing to celebrate.

Admissions officials are among those who need no convincing on this score. Nationally, the female-to-male ratio in higher education is roughly 60 to 40 percent. Such gender imbalances can put colleges at a competitive disadvantage because boys and girls alike tend to look for campuses with even gender distributions. Not surprisingly, admissions officials have been accused of favoring male applicants in a desperate bid for balance—a practice that caught the attention of federal civil-rights investigators, who subpoenaed admissions data from 19 institutions in 2009 but suspended the probe this spring amid disputes over the data.

Meanwhile, the federal stimulus programs that helped colleges and universities make ends meet at the height of the recession are fading fast, even as states grapple with plummeting tax revenues and daunting deficits. For cash-strapped colleges and universities, the notion that roughly half of their potential "customers" are more likely to quit school early or skip higher education altogether is troubling indeed.

All of us ought to find it troubling as well, regardless of our gender or political persuasion. Amid a global marketplace brimming with hungry competitors, can we afford to foot the bill for generations of lost boys?

Establishing a White House Council on Boys to Men could be a good first step toward translating some of the widespread concerns about lost boys into concrete action. The commission that put forth the now-stalled proposal has identified five "crisis level" factors: education, emotional health, physical health, father involvement, and work. By combining the perspectives and findings of various experts, a White House council could provide a multidisciplinary, integral approach to a difficult social issue.

Meaningful action, however, will be impossible unless educators at all levels summon the courage to take a stand against the forces of political correctness and either/or thinking ("Either women or men can succeed, but not both"). The underlying causes of the problem of lost boys might still be matters of debate and require further research, but when it comes to how American boys are doing these days, the research is in—they are lost, and they need help.