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Gender Gap: Colleges see demand for qualified male applicants grow as young women excel in high school

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GENDER GAP

Colleges see demand for qualified male applicants grow as

young women excel in high school

It has fast become the status quo: applicant pools for selective colleges include more females than males. Entering classes at colleges like Colby typically include more women than men—57 percent to 43 percent in the Colby Class of 2011.

“As a co-ed institution, we want to be somewhere near parity, if possible, because of the academic and social dynamics,” said Dean of Admissions Parker Beverage. “We probably can’t get down to fifty-fifty, but we don’t want to get as high as sixty-forty. It’s tough to right the ship if the numbers get too imbalanced.”

But in a trend seen across the country, the numbers for top high school seniors are just that. Girls tend to get better grades in high school than boys (for reasons still open to speculation), making it harder for the most selective colleges to enroll classes with equal numbers of both.

The disparity in college admissions starts long before hopeful prospects submit their applications. Long before high school, even. According to Colby professors who are experts on this, it’s a result of the way boys are socialized, negative media messages directed at boys, and the fact that women now have more opportunities.

“There’s something happening out there, and we’re trying to figure out what it is,” said Professor Mark Tappan, chair of the Education Program and a scholar who teaches and writes about children and adolescents in schools and society.



*Story by David Treadwell
Illustrations by P.J. Loughran*

With this year’s entering Class of 2012, the gender-balance ship righted itself at Colby. According to Beverage the College saw a higher percentage of male admitted students choose Colby (36 percent) than female (31 percent). The result is a 51 percent to 49 percent female to male balance for the Class of 2012.

Admissions officers were pleasantly surprised, as they had fended off what is becoming a disconcerting trend. Qualified female applicants are more abundant than male, which leaves college admissions officers at risk of moving to a predominantly female student body.

And a pronounced gender imbalance in a student body can make a college less attractive to students—both male and female—who want a co-ed experience.

“You want to be a place that’s welcoming to all,” Beverage said.

Maintaining that balance hasn’t been a problem at Colby thus far, with gender coming into play in the admissions process mostly at the very end, when—and if—the College goes to its wait list. At that point, being a guy can be an advantage, Beverage said.

When it comes to the gender issue, Colby is hardly alone. Consider the experience of Colby’s NESCAC peers in 2007.

At Amherst applications had been running around 50-50—until last year, when the balance suddenly tipped to 58 percent women. At Bates women have never represented more than 52 percent of the student body, but gender is a factor in admissions, officials there say. Bowdoin has maintained its roughly 50-50 split (52 percent men to 48 percent women in 2007) but it’s getting tougher every year.

Said Bowdoin’s Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Bill Shain, “Everybody is competing harder for men.”

The trend at highly selective liberal arts colleges mirrors the change seen nationally.

In 2007, 56.3 percent of students enrolled full time in U.S. colleges were female; by 2015 that figure will climb to 57.9 percent, according to published reports.

It's a trend that raises interesting questions. Why do young women generally out-perform their male counterparts in high school in grades? Does this trend unfairly penalize young women applying to the nation's best colleges? How does this play out in the college classroom?

First, it may be helpful to look at the numbers *beneath* the numbers.

According to Steve Thomas, director of admissions at Colby, the men and women who enrolled in Colby's Class of 2011 had comparable high school records, but the scores on combined SATs (required at Colby but not at all peer colleges) for women were slightly lower than the men's.

In schools that report class rank, 70 percent of the women graduated in the top 10 percent of their class versus 46 percent of the men, Thomas said. On the SAT verbal, the mean for women was 688 versus 671 for men; on the SAT math, the mean was 669 for females versus 690 for males. Males nationwide have consistently outperformed females on combined SAT scores over the past 30 years.

The disparity in high school academic performance is less clear-cut when viewed in this way. But the gender gap is coming up for discussion more and more at college admissions conferences, said Martha Merrill, dean of admissions at Connecticut College. One admissions dean, Jennifer Delahunty Britz of Kenyon College, was so concerned about the issue she wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* in 2006 flatly stating that qualified young men are more valued as applicants simply because there are fewer of them. As a result, Britz said, equally qualified girls were being rejected. Boys, despite being outperformed in high school, were catching a break.

"We have told today's young women that the world is their oyster; the problem is, so many of them believed us that the standards for admission to today's most selective colleges are stiffer for women than men. How's that for an unintended consequence of the women's liberation movement?" Britz wrote.

It was the most public broaching of the issue up to that time, and Britz bore the brunt of the reaction.

"I was getting about five-hundred e-mails a day, at first, and people still bring it up," she said. "Feminists were mad. Men were mad. A young woman brought up the issue during an interview in Hong Kong. And

academic potential in addition to past achievement.

Others say there is more going on than differing rates of maturation. One researcher noted that there is no literacy gap in home-schooled students, because home-schooling parents tend to teach to a child's interests—and boys' interests are

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Mark Tappan professor and chair of the Education Program

my daughter even got a death threat. I hadn't really known the power of the truth."

Britz remains sanguine about the gender issue at Kenyon because the college receives ample applications from qualified young men and the female-to-male ratio (55-45) is acceptable. But, she said, she's concerned about the broader societal implications of the gender gap—and boys apparently lagging academically.

"Something is awry with our K-through-twelve educational system," Britz said. Some admissions officials, including Katie Fretwell, director of admissions at Amherst, feel that boys simply mature later than girls. When considering young men, Fretwell and others look at

different from those of girls.

"The women's movement has definitely leveled the playing field, but cultural factors also come into play," said Tappan. "Girls are rewarded for doing well in school. For boys, it's not cool to be good in school."

That should come as no surprise, said Margaret McFadden, associate professor of American studies. As barriers to female success are taken down and strong role models are produced, more girls are making use of expanded opportunities.

McFadden, who has written extensively on pop culture, said the change also directly relates to boys being saturated with





negative role models by an increasingly pervasive media.

“Part of what we’re seeing as a model for masculinity in all of those areas of popular culture is very, very limited and is very anti-intellectual,” she said. “It’s about physical prowess, it’s about muscles, it’s about sexuality—and a very oppressive

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version of sexuality, a kind of domination of women.”

McFadden points to the popularity of “frat-pack” films that show young men to be bumbling but appealing—and matched with high-achieving women. “I don’t think there are a lot of models for brainiac macho men,” she said.

Tappan adds another theory to the gender discrepancy. “We still live in a patriarchal society,” he said. “Boys figure that they don’t have to try as hard, because they’ll do alright anyway.”

Bolstering that view is a recent report by the American Association of University Women that says more men are

graduating from high school and college than ever before. The report discounts the idea that there is a crisis in education of boys, saying, “Perhaps the most compelling evidence against the existence of a boys’ crisis is that men continue to out-earn women in the workplace.”

The group’s members were concerned about arguments by conservative commentators that boys had become disadvantaged and were being discriminated against as schools intended to favor girls.

Tappan points to the work he is doing with Boys to Men, a Portland-based organization that supports healthy development of adolescent boys by addressing and publicizing these issues. Another Boys to Men leader, Bernie Hershberger, director of counseling services at Bowdoin, said that from an early age some boys see girls working hard and decide to leave the academics to them.

“More than anything else, boys don’t want to be embarrassed,” Hershberger said. “If they feel they can’t succeed at something, they’ll pull away. Actually, they’re getting intimidated by girls.”

It’s a dynamic that fits junior high, but could it continue through high school and beyond? How does it play out in Colby classrooms?

Queries to some Colby faculty members for this story resulted in several professors declining comment and others approaching the topic with trepidation. As one professor wrote in an e-mail, “I’m not sure how frank a discussion I’m willing to have on the pages of Colby’s alumni magazine.”

Elizabeth Leonard, the John J. and Cornelia V. Gibson Professor of History, said some of her department’s best and most accomplished students are men and some are women.

But Leonard believes that women do tend to be more comfortable being smart—and comfortable about showing it. “It’s harder to be a male student who’s really committed to scholarship and not be embarrassed about that,” she said. “The challenge is to create a culture on campus where academic performance is celebrated as much as athletic performance.”

Tom Morrione ’65, the Charles A. Dana Professor of Sociology, said he has found that women tend to keep their academic focus better than men. “They follow through on projects. They write more, and they write more easily on their papers.”

Morrione said he once asked the students in a class to raise their hands if they had an appointment book. “Almost all of the women raised their hands,” he said, “whereas none of the men did.”

It’s easy to “essentialize trends,” said Martin Connelly ’08, who interviewed students and faculty to produce a podcast for insideColby.com on

the disproportionate number of women students in leadership positions at Colby—and possible reasons for the disparity.

Connelly said he doesn’t see a stigma attached to academic achievement at Colby and that in his experience women and men participate equally in classroom discussions. But he also noticed that, in group work, women students are most often tapped as organizers.

Could superior organizational skills in the increasingly competitive and stressful world of high school academics be one factor in the rise of girls in admissions pools?

Connelly didn’t know, but he has noticed one thing: “Procrastination,” he said, “is more a guy thing.”