

Students

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The New Gender Divide

Data show that more women than men now enroll in college, but is there really a 'boy crisis'?

By ROBIN WILSON

Elon, N.C.

As a professor lectures, Clayton Winkelvoss slouches low in his seat, surrounded by a group of young women. When he volunteers to solve a mathematical problem, they whoop and holler, cheering him on as he approaches an overhead projector at the front of the class.

The women shout instructions. "Change that line again!" one of them barks when Mr. Winkelvoss adjusts some calculations to make a line move on a graph. He deftly completes the task and takes his seat. The young women applaud. Some direct quips and glances at Mr. Winkelvoss, whom they treat like a mascot.

For the rest of the lesson, the women greet each new concept with a high-pitched chorus of oohs and aahs. When they are stumped, they yell out "Are you serious?!" and "This is insane!" After one exercise, a few collapse into giggles, nearly slipping off their chairs.

The gathering sounds like a boisterous bachelorette party. But it is an honors course in statistics at Elon University — a class of 10 women and just one man. That imbalance is becoming more familiar at Elon and on many other campuses where women constitute a firm majority of undergraduates and an even greater proportion of the very top students. At Elon, for example, 61 percent of the university's 4,800 undergraduates were female in each of the last six years, and in the honors program women outnumber men nearly five to one.

Nationwide, women make up about 58 percent of undergraduates, according to the U.S. Education Department's most recent statistics.

"Women are leading the charge here," says Jason Zelesky, associate dean of students at Clark University, in Massachusetts, where 60 percent of the students are female. "They are controlling our classrooms, they're dominating what have traditionally been male-oriented programs like business management and chemistry, and they tend to be getting our academic prizes and fellowships."

In fact, Mr. Zelesky started a support group for male students last year. "We have these great conversations about what it's like to be a man in our culture," he says. But some of the young men, he notes, have begun to feel "they are losing the race" — both academically and socially. Because the campus is dominated by women, it is not uncommon for the university to make changes to accommodate them. A residence-hall suite that may have been open to men one year, for example, may be converted to a women-only suite the next.

"We are always trying to move men around," says Mr. Zelesky, "to open up whole spaces for women."

Engineering and Football

Nationally, women's enrollment began to overtake men's in the early 1980s. In the last couple of years, the gap has widened enough to alarm state education boards, researchers, and higher-education policy wonks, who worry that men are falling behind even as women are succeeding.

Colleges are responding by trying to entice more young men to enroll — adding engineering programs and football teams, changing the color palette of their admissions brochures from pastel to primary, and quietly tweaking their standards to give male applicants a leg up (see story, Page A39). The gender gap is already changing classroom dynamics, rerouting social relationships, and paving a dangerous path toward a lopsided future, say some policy analysts.

"Girls are beating the pants off boys," says Tom Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. "We have to get boys more engaged so they persist longer in education, and that just isn't happening."

Some women's groups, however, say the picture is not that clear-cut. Yes, more men than women are forgoing higher education. But those men are primarily from low-income and minority groups, making the gap more about class and race than about gender. The number of men attending college is still increasing, those analysts point out, just not as fast as the number of women. And men still out-earn women after college, taking the top jobs in most professions.

"There is this echo of fear when women are achieving a lot and doing well, but when girls do better, it doesn't mean that boys are necessarily doing worse," says Catherine Hill, director of research for the American Association of University Women. She calls concern over the rising proportion of college women a backlash that masks "a discomfort with women's achievement."

There are two ways to look at the gender gap — one in terms of college enrollment and the other in terms of students' educational achievement. On both fronts, education experts differ on the scope and the significance of the problem. Their differences highlight a schism between longtime advocates for women and a growing number of educators who are increasingly concerned about opportunities for young men.

The strongest data on the gender gap in enrollment come from a report published last year by the American Council on Education, which says women now dominate in almost every measure of college attendance. Girls are more likely than boys to take college-preparatory courses in high school, more likely to enroll in college immediately after high-school graduation, and more likely to earn a bachelor's degree.

The report, "Gender Equity in Higher Education: 2006," found that the gender gap was greatest among low-income students of all races, and disappears among students whose families are at the top of the economic ladder.

Mr. Mortenson predicts dire consequences if the situation for young men does not improve. Older men today are more likely to be college-educated than are younger men, he says. That has not been true since the end of World War II. It is a particular problem, he says, because men who forgo college don't have as many career options today as they once did.

"Men without jobs appear to be lost," Mr. Mortenson wrote in the September issue of his newsletter, *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, "and men who are lost too often seem to find trouble for themselves and for others."

But Jacqueline E. King, who directs the ACE's Center for Policy Analysis and wrote the gender-equity report, cautions that it is important to identify which men are most at risk. "We shouldn't put upper-income white men at the top of that list," she says. The gender gap, she adds, is not nearly as big a problem as the gap between the college-going rates of black students and white students. "Let's keep this in perspective," she urges.

Sorting out gender differences in students' educational performances is even trickier. Fifteen years ago, the university women's association issued a report called "How Schools Shortchange Girls." It said that schools' curricula did not meet the needs of girls, that teachers paid more attention to boys, and that girls lagged behind academically.

According to the Education Sector, a nonprofit think tank, boys continue to perform well. "Boys are scoring higher and achieving more than they ever have before," says a report the group published last summer called "The Truth About Boys and Girls." It notes, however, that girls have improved their performance even faster.

"The real story is not bad news about boys doing worse," says the report, "it's good news about girls doing better." As for the "boy crisis," the Education Sector says it has been manufactured by "a dizzying array of so-called experts [who] have seized on the boy crisis as a way to draw attention to their pet educational, cultural, or ideological issues."

Data show, however, that in college young women do outperform young men by many measures. College women earn better grades, hold more leadership posts, spend more time studying, and earn more honors and awards. They report being more involved than young men in student clubs and volunteer work.

And what are young men doing? Studies show they spend more time than their female counterparts exercising, watching television, playing video games, and partying. (See graph on this page). Young men are 10 percentage points more likely than young women to report that they sometimes oversleep and miss a class, says Linda J. Sax, an associate professor in residence at the University of California at Los Angeles who is writing a book on the gender gap.

The gender differential is not lost on parents. Marilee Jones, dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, hears about it each time she gives a talk to parents about the college admissions process. "The No. 1 complaint is that their sons are not on top of the process, they're not dedicated, they just don't have their act together compared to the daughters," says Ms. Jones.

The dean considers herself a feminist, and believes that schools, colleges, and other institutions have wisely created more opportunities for girls. But those efforts have thrown off the traditional gender balance between males and females, she says.

Girls, says Ms. Jones, "are expected to be fun, well-mannered, pretty, and thin, but they're also expected to be leaders and athletes and dynamic decision makers." What roles does that leave for boys?

"A lot of boys can be kind of lost," she says. "I think the needs of boys are being neglected."

Elementary, middle, and high schools, for example, are designed for girls, she says. Students are expected to sit quietly at their desks, and teachers stress skills that require fine motor control — something that boys typically have in shorter supply. Boys, say other experts, are more likely than girls to be medicated for hyperactivity, to be disciplined by teachers, and to drop out of school.

At least two dozen scholars who are concerned about these issues have formed the Boys Project. The group's Web site says it wants to do for boys what the women's movement did for girls. It collects data documenting the gender gap, fields questions online from parents and teachers, and is planning a national meeting in May.

The project's scholars were assembled in 2005 by Judith Kleinfeld, a psychology professor at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks who studies gender. She says the gender gap affects even young men from middle- and upper-income families, who may go to college but are not necessarily engaged. "They are going with the flow and being dragged along," says Ms. Kleinfeld.

Young women, she says, are much better writers than young men, on average. "I'll get two-page essays single-spaced from the girls that are grammatically correct, and the guys will dash something off, or won't bring it in at all," says Ms. Kleinfeld. It used to be, she says, "we would measure our classes to see if girls were talking as much as boys. Now, boys just hang back."

The 'Advance Guard'

The heated debate between experts has prompted public higher-education systems in states like California and Maine to study the gender gap. The California Postsecondary Education Commission issued two reports on the subject last year. One said that in 2004, females made up 58 percent of the white students, 64 percent of the Latino students, and 67 percent of the black students who attended the California State University and the University of California combined.

The gaps between women and men are wide at private institutions, as well, including liberal-arts colleges and historically black universities. At some private black colleges, the proportion of women is as high as 70 percent, says Michael L. Lomax, president of the United Negro College Fund.

"I think that minorities in this case are the advance guard," says Mr. Lomax, who was president of Dillard University until 2004. He recalls having to reprimand female students at Dillard who fought over male students because they were so scarce. "I would say to the white community: Don't get complacent on this issue," he says. "The trends, if they are not reversed, are going to be in your community as well."

Indeed, Harvard University saw its first majority-female freshman class in the 2005 academic year. The trend continued this year, with an entering class that is 52 percent female. William Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard, says the university considers that an accomplishment. "We'd been stereotyped as a 'male place,'" he says. "We had a lot of history working against us."

But some colleges are pushing hard in the other direction. Nearly 65 percent of Dickinson College's students were female in 1999 when Robert J. Massa was hired. "That was getting to what I would call the danger zone," says Mr. Massa, who is vice president for enrollment and college relations. This year Dickinson is 55 percent female.

Neither young men nor young women want to attend a co-ed institution that enrolls too many women, Mr. Massa contends. "My hunch is that when students see a 30-70 male-female split, the women react as if it were a single-sex school — which they previously decided was not for them — and the males worry that their friends will think they are going to a 'girls' school," he says.

Mr. Massa has worked hard to turn the numbers at Dickinson around. The admissions office has used a variety of tools to find more qualified men — including buying more names of male students who have taken the PSAT. To encourage those men to apply, the college has made more personal contact with them, and ensured it has men on its admissions staff.

Dickinson also tells stories of successful male students on its Web site and in its alumni magazine. "There are a higher percentage of women who are really significantly engaged on campus than men, and it would be natural to feature women in all of our stories," says Mr. Massa. "But we purposefully look for men."

Some campuses have made even bolder moves. In 1976, 51 percent of the students at Tulsa Community College were male. By 2005 the proportion had fallen to 37 percent. When the college studied the issue, officials were surprised to find that the most underrepresented population was white men from rural areas, says Lauren F. Brookey, vice president of external affairs. The community college started a Web site last year that lists careers the college believed would appeal to those young men, including Web-site designer and laboratory technician. The site (<http://www.fastforwardtcc.com>) depicts a delivery man quickly transforming into a man wearing a white lab coat.

The campus also associates its name with male-oriented events, sponsoring a local minor-league football team. This spring it is considering holding an Xbox video-game tournament.

A few years ago, Elon University started a small engineering program, in part to attract male students, and it bumped its football team up to the NCAA's Division I. "One of the things guys like is sports teams that are notable, that they see on the ticker at the bottom of ESPN," says Greg L. Zaiser, dean of admissions at Elon.

The university has also changed its admissions standards, moving from a rolling-admissions program to one with some hard and fast deadlines. Because young men are generally less conscientious than young women when filing applications, says Mr. Zaiser, the strict deadlines motivate male applicants to "be more on top of the process."

The university has also enrolled men to a greater degree than they apply. For example, in this year's freshman class, men made up only 37 percent of the applicants but 42 percent of those matriculated. Mr. Zaiser says that is because compared with women, a greater proportion of men who apply and are accepted end up enrolling. He is not exactly sure why, but suspects that since men typically wait longer to apply than women, perhaps they apply to fewer colleges or are more sure of where they will attend once admitted.

Some of Elon's efforts may be starting to pan out. After six years of enrolling a student body that was 61-percent female, the proportion of young women at the university has slipped slightly, to 60 percent this year.

Mr. Zaiser knows that giving special consideration to male applicants would be controversial, and he is quick to add that Elon does not do that. "We'd love to admit as many men as possible," he says. "That said, there is no point system, no giving men a bump up. There is no affirmative action for men."

Dickinson's Mr. Massa acknowledges that colleges do give some men extra consideration, although he contends that the efforts fall short of affirmative action. "Affirmative action is a whole program geared to correct past wrongs," says Mr. Massa. Colleges, he says, treat being male like any other desirable trait that is in short supply. "What we're doing is trying to build a freshman class, and we take into account a number of student characteristics," he says. "Some of those are academic, some are leadership, others are geographic." Another is gender.

Jennifer Delahunty Britz calls that "the dirty little secret of admissions." Ms. Britz, who is dean of admissions and financial aid at Kenyon College, wrote about it in an opinion article for *The New York Times* last March. "I said what guidance counselors have been dealing with for years," she says. "Some amazing girls aren't getting in" to top colleges, while boys with less-sterling credentials are.

Michael A. Anselmi is general counsel at Towson University, which has carefully crafted a program that attracts male students but does not exclude females. He warns colleges to be careful in choosing less-qualified male applicants over better-qualified female ones. Institutions that do so could face problems if young women who are denied admission decide to challenge colleges in court. "Men have not as a category been discriminated against," he says. "If anything, historically they have been favored."

Social Imbalance

That history, however, is lost on most campuses today. Students who are undergraduates now do not remember a time when young men were dominant in the classroom.

"In high school the Top 10 was primarily females," recalls John L. McMillian, a sophomore at Elon. "The girls just worked harder."

Mr. McMillian is one of only 30 young men among 139 students enrolled in Elon's honors program. Last year only five men lived with 16 women in a red-brick Georgian residence hall reserved for honors students. This year, to strike a better balance, the university created spaces for 12 women and nine men in the honors dorm. The change has given the young men a critical mass, making it easier for them to find other guys to gather with around the hall's TV or to play an impromptu game of Frisbee at midnight.

"I've been here for four years," says William J. Allen, a senior majoring in chemistry who lives in the honors dorm. "I didn't do any of these things before, because the time I spent was hanging out with the girls."

It is not unusual for the men in Elon's honors program to find themselves in a distinct minority in classes, as well. At times that can make it uncomfortable for them to speak out. Jonathan Mahlandt, a freshman, says his honors course last semester, "The Global Experience," had only four men and 12 women. "We couldn't really say certain comments about girls and women because we were afraid we'd be shot down," he says. "But there were a lot of jokes about men and guys."

The imbalance affects the young women here, too. Several of the girls living in the honors dorm still have boyfriends from high school — in part, they say, because there just aren't many guys here to choose from. "When I first came to campus, there were jokes about how you have to get the guys before someone else does," says Molly McGowan, a first-year honors student who counts herself lucky to be dating a young man in the honors dorm. "My friends go to Duke to frat parties because there's guys there."

During January at Elon, many students participate in off-campus programs. In the honors hall, more women than men are gone this month, creating a male majority for the first time. It's a situation the young men here say they have been looking forward to. "There will be eight guys and four girls," says Mr. McMillian. "We're excited because the balance of power will change."

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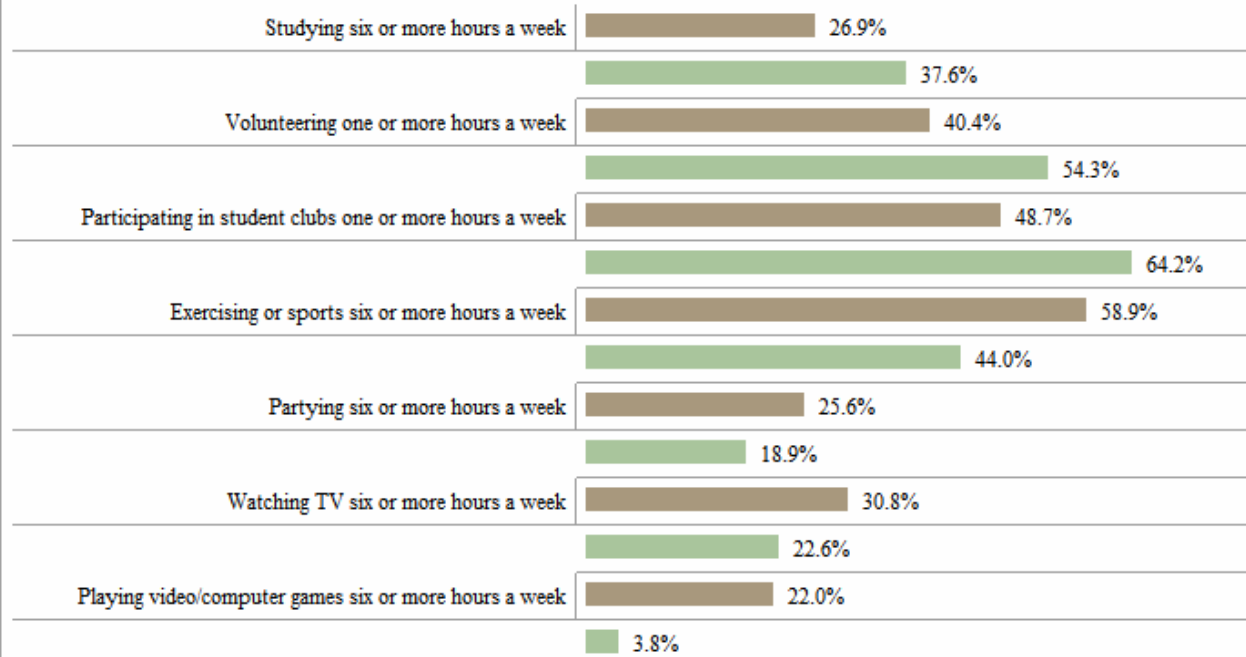
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WOMEN STUDY, MEN PLAY



How college freshmen in the fall of 2006 reported spending their time during a typical week of their last year in high school



SOURCE: "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2006," published by the U. of California at Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute

**UNDERGRADUATES BY AGE,
ETHNICITY, AND GENDER, 2003-4**

24 or younger

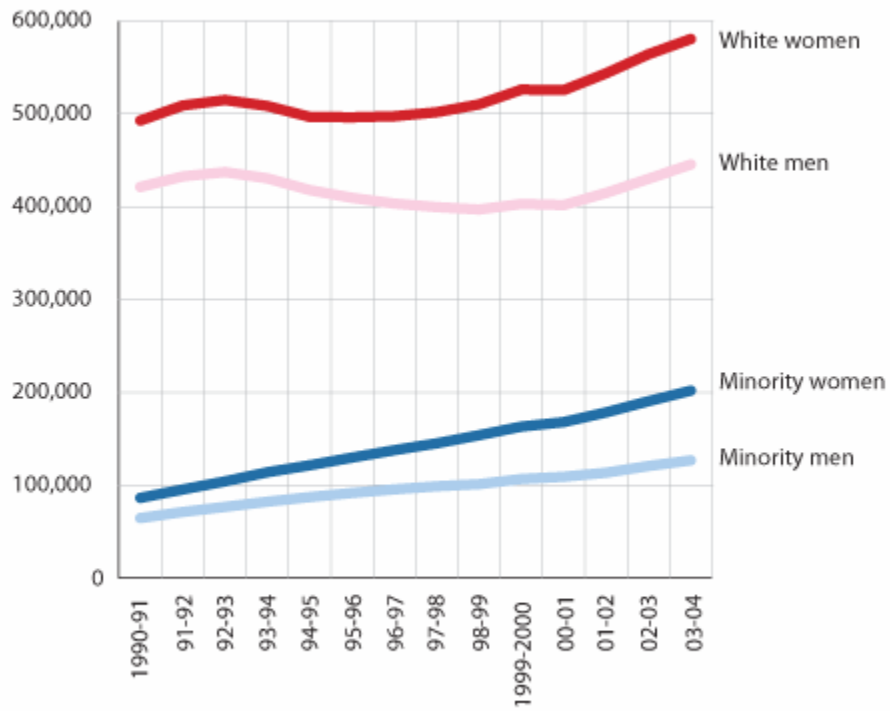
	Total	Men	Women
White	63%	29%	34%
African-American	50%	20%	30%
Hispanic	61%	26%	35%
Asian-American	65%	32%	33%
American Indian	49%	21%	28%
All	61%	28%	34%

25 or older

	Total	Men	Women
White	37%	15%	22%
African-American	50%	16%	34%
Hispanic	39%	15%	24%
Asian-American	35%	14%	21%
American Indian	51%	16%	35%
All	39%	15%	24%

SOURCE: American Council on Education

NUMBER OF BACHELOR'S DEGREES CONFERRED, BY GENDER AND ETHNICITY, 1990-91 TO 2003-4



SOURCE: American Council on Education