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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Academy of P.C. Sciences

By [JOHN TIERNEY](#)

I've slogged through enough reports from the National Academy of Sciences to know they're often not shining examples of the scientific method. But — call me naïve — I never thought the academy was cynical enough to publish a political tract like “Beyond Bias and Barriers,” the new report on discrimination against female scientists and engineers.

This is the kind of science you expect to find in The Onion: “Academy Forms Committee to Study Gender Discrimination, Bars Men from Participating.” Actually, it did allow a total of one man, Robert Birgeneau of Berkeley, on the 18-member committee, but that was presumably because he was already on record agreeing with the report's pre-ordained conclusion: academia must stop favoring male scientists and engineers.

How this favoritism occurs is difficult to discern, particularly if you make it through all 291 pages. Donna Shalala, the Clinton administration veteran who led the committee, begins the report with a story of male chauvinists refusing to give tenure to a promising young scholar (herself) just because she was a woman, but that happened three decades ago. Buried deep in the report is a more recent datum: when a woman is up for tenure today in science or engineering, her odds of being approved are the same as a man's.

The report says that women are discouraged from going into science because of social pressure and “unintentional” and “unconscious” biases — which may well exist. But Shalala's committee is so determined to blame everything on discrimination that it dismisses

other factors without giving them a fair hearing.

You can get a sense of its spirit of inquiry from “findings” like this one: “The academic success of girls now equals or exceeds that of boys at the high school and college levels, rendering moot all discussions of the biological and social factors that once produced sex differences in achievement at these levels.”

It may seem moot to the Shalala committee, composed mainly of university administrators and scientists who don't study sex differences (or are hostile to the idea that they exist). But it's not moot to the scientists who've documented persistent differences.

I consulted half a dozen of these experts about the report, and they all dismissed it as a triumph of politics over science. It's classic rent-seeking by a special-interest group that stands to get more money and jobs if the recommendations are adopted.

“I am embarrassed,” said Linda Gottfredson of the University of Delaware, “that this female-dominated panel of scientists would ignore decades of scientific evidence to justify an already disproved conclusion, namely, that the sexes do not differ in career-relevant interests and abilities.”

One well-documented difference is the disproportionately large number of boys scoring in the top percentile of the SAT math test. And when you compare boy math whizzes with girl math whizzes, more differences appear. The boys score much higher on the math portion of the SAT than on the verbal, whereas the girls are more balanced — high on the verbal as well as the math.

The girls have more career options, and they have different priorities than the boys, as the psychologists David Lubinski and Camilla Persson Benbow have demonstrated by tracking students with the exceptional mathematical ability to become top-flight researchers in science and engineering.

As adolescents, the boys are especially interested in abstract theoretical pursuits and “inorganic” disciplines involving things, whereas the girls

are more interested in “social values,” “people contact” and “organic” disciplines. Plenty of these girls end up going to graduate school, and some become superb physicists and engineers, but many choose law, medicine, education and so-called soft sciences like biology or psychology.

After decades of schools pushing girls into science and universities desperately looking for gender diversity on their faculties, it’s insulting to pretend that most female students are too intimidated to know their best interests. As Science magazine reported in 2000, the social scientist Patti Hausman offered a simple explanation for why women don’t go into engineering: they don’t want to.

“Wherever you go, you will find females far less likely than males to see what is so fascinating about ohms, carburetors or quarks,” Hausman said. “Reinventing the curriculum will not make me more interested in learning how my dishwasher works.”

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