

July 9, 2006

THE NEW GENDER DIVIDE

## At Colleges, Women Are Leaving Men in the Dust

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Nearing graduation, Rick Kohn is not putting much energy into his final courses.

"I take the path of least resistance," said Mr. Kohn, who works 25 hours a week to put himself through the [University of North Carolina](#), Greensboro. "This summer, I looked for the four easiest courses I could take that would let me graduate in August."

It is not that Mr. Kohn, 24, is indifferent to education. He is excited about economics and hopes to get his master's in the field. But the other classes, he said, just do not seem worth the effort.

"What's the difference between an A and a B?" he asks. "Either way, you go on to the next class."

He does not see his female classmates sharing that attitude. Women work harder in school, Mr. Kohn believes.

"The girls care more about their G.P.A. and the way they look on paper," he said.

A quarter-century after women became the majority on college campuses, men are trailing them in more than just enrollment.

Department of Education statistics show that men, whatever their race or socioeconomic group, are less likely than women to get bachelor's degrees — and among those who do, fewer complete their degrees in four or five years. Men also get worse grades than women.

And in two national studies, college men reported that they studied less and socialized more than their female classmates.

Small wonder, then, that at elite institutions like [Harvard](#), small liberal arts colleges like Dickinson, huge public universities like the [University of Wisconsin](#) and U.C.L.A. and smaller ones like Florida Atlantic University, women are walking off with a disproportionate share of the honors degrees.

It is not that men are in a downward spiral: they are going to college in greater numbers and are more likely to graduate than two decades ago.

Still, men now make up only 42 percent of the nation's college students. And with sex discrimination fading and their job opportunities widening, women are coming on much stronger, often leapfrogging the men to the academic finish.

"The boys are about where they were 30 years ago, but the girls are just on a tear, doing much, much better," said Tom Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education in Washington.

Take Jen Smyers, who has been a powerhouse in her three years at American University in Washington.

She has a dean's scholarship, has held four internships and three jobs in her time at American, made the dean's list almost every term and also led the campus women's initiative. And when the rest of her class graduates with bachelor's degrees next year, Ms. Smyers will be finishing her master's.

She says her intense motivation is not so unusual. "The women here are on fire," she said.

The gender differences are not uniform. In the highest-income families, men 24 and under attend college as much as, or slightly more than, their sisters, according to the American Council on Education, whose report on these issues is scheduled for release this week.

Young men from low-income families, which are disproportionately black and Hispanic, are the most underrepresented on campus, though in middle-income families too, more daughters than sons attend college. In recent years the gender gap has been widening, especially among low-income whites and Hispanics.

When it comes to earning bachelor's degrees, the gender gap is smaller than the gap between whites and blacks or Hispanics, federal data shows.

All of this has helped set off intense debate over whether these trends show a worrisome achievement gap between men and women or whether the concern should instead be directed toward the educational difficulties of poor boys, black, white or Hispanic.

"Over all, the differences between blacks and whites, rich and poor, dwarf the differences between men and women within any particular group," says Jacqueline King, a researcher for the American Council on Education's Center for Policy Analysis and the author of the forthcoming report.

#### Differences Seen Early

Still, across all race and class lines, there are significant performance differences between young men and women that start before college.

High school boys score higher than girls on the SAT, particularly on the math section. Experts say that is both because the timed multiple-choice questions play to boys' strengths and because more middling female students take the test. Boys also score slightly better on the math and science sections of national assessment tests. On the same assessments, 12th-grade boys, even those with college-educated parents, do far worse than girls on reading and writing.

Faced with applications and enrollment numbers that tilt toward women, some selective private colleges are giving men a slight boost in admissions. On other campuses the female predominance is becoming noticeable in the female authors added to the reading lists and the diminished dating scene.

And when it gets to graduation, differences are evident too.

At Harvard, 55 percent of the women graduated with honors this spring, compared with barely half the men. And at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, a public university, women made up 64 percent of this year's graduates, and they got 75 percent of the honors degrees and 79 percent of the highest honors, summa cum laude.

Of course, nationwide, there are young men at the top of the class and fields like computer science, engineering and physics that are male dominated.

Professors interviewed on several campuses say that in their experience men seem to cluster in a disproportionate share at both ends of the spectrum — students who are the most brilliantly creative, and students who cannot keep up.

"My best male students are every bit as good as my best female students," said Wendy Moffat, a longtime English professor at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania. "But the range among the guys is wider."

From the time they are young, boys are far more likely than girls to be suspended or expelled, or have a learning disability or emotional problem diagnosed. As teenagers, they are more likely to drop out of high school, commit suicide or be incarcerated. Such difficulties can have echoes even in college men.

"They have a sense of lassitude, a lack of focus," said William Pollack, director of the Centers for Men and Young Men at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School.

At a time when jobs that require little education are disappearing, Mr. Mortenson predicts trouble for boys whose "educational attainment is not keeping up with the demands of the economy."

In the 1990's, even as women poured into college at a higher rate than men, attention focused largely on their troubles, especially after the 1992 report "How Schools Shortchange Girls" from the American Association of University Women.

But some scholars say the new emphasis on young men's problems — recent magazine covers and talk shows describing a "boy crisis" — is misguided in a world where men still dominate the math-science axis, earn more money and wield more power than women.

"People keep asking me why this is such a hot topic, and I think it does go back to the ideas people carry in their heads," said Sara Mead, the author of a report for Education Sector, a Washington policy center, that concluded that boys, especially young ones, were making progress on many measures. It suggested that the heightened concern might in part reflect some people's nervousness about women's achievement.

"The idea that girls could be ahead is so shocking that they think it must be a crisis for boys," Ms. Mead said. "I'm troubled by this tone of crisis. Even if you control for the field they're in, boys right out of college make more money than girls, so at the end of the day, is it grades and honors that matter, or something else the boys may be doing?"

### Women in the Majority

What is beyond dispute is that the college landscape is changing. Women now make up 58 percent of those enrolled in two- and four-year colleges and are, over all, the majority in graduate schools and professional schools too.

Most institutions of higher learning, except engineering schools, now have a female edge, with many small liberal arts colleges and huge public universities alike hovering near the 60-40 ratio. Even Harvard, long a male bastion, has begun to tilt toward women.

"The class we just admitted will be 52 percent female," said William Fitzsimmons, Harvard's dean of admissions.

While Harvard accepts men and women in proportions roughly equal to their presence in the applicant pool, other elite universities do not. At [Brown University](#), men made up not quite 40 percent of this year's applicants, but 47 percent of those admitted.

Women now outnumber men two to one at places like the State University of New York at New Paltz, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Baltimore City Community College. And they make up particularly large majorities among older students.

The lower the family income, the greater the disparity between men and women attending college, said Ms. King of the American Council on Education's Center for Policy Analysis.

Thomas diPrete, a [Columbia University](#) sociology professor, has found that while boys whose parents had only a high school education used to be more likely to get a college education than their sisters, that has flipped.

Still, the gender gap has moved to the front burner in part because of interest from educated mothers worrying that their sons are adrift or disturbed that their girls are being passed over by admissions officers eager for boys, said Judith Kleinfeld, a University of Alaska professor who has created the Boys Project ([boysproject.net](http://boysproject.net)), a coalition of researchers, educators and parents to address boys' troubles.

"I hate to be cynical, but when it was a problem of black or poor kids, nobody cared, but now that it's a problem of white sons of college-educated parents, it's moving very rapidly to the forefront," Dr. Kleinfeld said. "At most colleges, there is a sense that a lot of boys are missing in action."

Beyond the data points — graduation rates, enrollment rates, grades — there are subtle differences in the nature of men's and women's college experiences.

In dozens of interviews on three campuses — Dickinson College; American University; and the University of North Carolina, Greensboro — male and female students alike agreed that the slackers in their midst were mostly male, and that the fireballs were mostly female.

Almost all speculated that it had something to do with the women's movement.

"The roles have changed a lot," said Travis Rothway, a 23-year-old junior at American University, a private school where only 36 percent of last year's freshmen were male. "Men have always been the dominant figure, providing for the household, but now women have broken out of their domestic roles in society. I don't think guys' willingness to work and succeed has changed, it's more that the women have stepped up."

Ben Turner, who graduated from American this spring, said he did not believe that work habits were determined by gender — but acknowledged that he and his girlfriend fit the stereotypes.

"She does all her readings for classes, and I don't always," Mr. Turner said. "She's more organized than me, so if there's a paper due a week from Monday, she's already started, and I know I'll be doing it the weekend before. She studies more than I do because she doesn't like cramming and being stressed. She just has a better work ethic than I do."

Ms. Smyers, also at American, said she recently ended a relationship with another student, in part out of frustration over his playing video games four hours a day.

"He said he was thinking of trying to cut back to 15 hours a week," she said. "I said, 'Fifteen hours is what I spend on my internship, and I get paid \$1,300 a month.' That's my litmus test now: I won't date anyone who plays video games. It means they're choosing to do something that wastes their time and sucks the life out of them."

Many male students say with something resembling pride that they get by without much studying.

"If I take a class and never study, I can still get a B," said Scott Daniels, a 22-year-old at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. "I know that if I'd applied myself more, I would have had better grades."

On each campus, many young men concluded that the easy B was good enough. But on each campus, some had seen that attitude backfire.

Michael Comes arrived at Dickinson two years ago from a private school in New Jersey where he had done well, but floundered his freshman year.

"I came here with the attitudes I'd had in high school, that the big thing, for guys, is to give the appearance of not doing much work, trying to excel at sports and shine socially," Mr. Comes said. "It's like some cultural A.D.D. for boys, I think — like Bart Simpson. For men, it's just not cool to study."

So when he no longer had parents and teachers keeping after him, or a 10:30 p.m. lights-out rule, he did not do much work.

"I stayed in my room a lot, I slept a lot, and I messed up so much that I had to go to summer school," Mr. Comes said. "But I'm back on track now."

'A Male Entitlement Thing'

On each campus, the young women interviewed talked mostly about their drive to do well.

"Most college women want a high-powered career that they are passionate about," Ms. Smyers said. "But they also want a family, and that probably means taking time off, and making dinner. I'm rushing through here, taking the most credits you can take without paying extra, because I want to do some amazing things, and establish myself as a career woman, before I settle down."

Her male classmates, she said, feel less pressure.

"The men don't seem to hustle as much," Ms. Smyers said. "I think it's a male entitlement thing. They think they can sit back and relax and when they graduate, they'll still get a good job. They seem to think that if they have a firm handshake and speak properly, they'll be fine."

Such differences were apparent in the 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement. While the survey of 90,000 students at 530 institutions relies on self-reporting, it is used by many colleges to measure themselves against other institutions.

Men were significantly more likely than women to say they spent at least 11 hours a week relaxing or socializing, while women were more likely to say they spent at least that much time preparing for class. More men also said

they frequently came to class unprepared.

Linda Sax, an associate professor of education at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, has found similar gender differences in her study of 17,000 men and women at 204 co-ed colleges and universities.

Using data from U.C.L.A.'s Higher Education Research Institute annual studies, she found that men were more likely than women to skip classes, not complete their homework and not turn it in on time.

"Women do spend more time studying and their grades are better," Professor Sax said, "but their grades are better even more than the extra studying time would account for."

Researchers say such differences make sense, given boys' experience in their earlier school years. And some experts argue that what is being seen as a boy problem is actually maleness itself, with the noisy, energetic antics and high jinks of young boys now redefined as a behavior problem by teachers who do not know how to handle them.

There is also an economic rationale for men to take education less seriously. In the early years of a career, Laura Perna of the [University of Pennsylvania](#) has found, college increases women's earnings far more than men's.

"That's the trap," Dr. Kleinfeld said. "In the early years, young men don't see the wage benefit. They can sell their strength and make money."

### Lingering Money Worries

At Greensboro, where more than two-thirds of the students are female, and about one in five is black, many young men say they are torn between wanting quick money and seeking the long-term rewards of education.

"A lot of my friends made good money working in high school, in construction or as electricians, and they didn't go to college, but they're doing very well now," said Mr. Daniels, the Greensboro student, who works 25 to 30 hours a week. "One of my best friends, he's making \$70,000, he's got his own truck and health benefits. The honest truth is, I feel weird being a college student and having no money."

Mr. Kohn said it was, literally, an accident that he landed at Greensboro.

"In high school, I had a G.P.A. of 1.9 and I never took the SAT's because I knew I wasn't going to college," he said. "If you don't have goals, you don't set yourself up to be disappointed."

But soon after high school, Mr. Kohn was in a serious car crash, and discovered in rehabilitation that the state would pay for community college. To his surprise he did well enough to transfer to Greensboro, where he now plans to pursue a master's degree. But when Mr. Kohn overheard a freshman woman describing her plans,

including four summer school courses to help her get a master's in education a bit earlier, he was bemused.

"For a freshman to be in such a hurry, it seems a little obsessive," he said.

Many of the young women studying at Greensboro have older brothers without college degrees, or younger brothers with little interest in college.

The seven children of the Thompson family of Oxford, N.C., embody the gender differences regarding education.

There are three men and four women in the family, ranging in age from 36 to 23. Christina and Lynette, the two youngest, are both at Greensboro. The two oldest daughters went to college, too. But none of the sons got college degrees: one is a truck driver, one is autistic and living at home and one is a floor manager at a Research Triangle company.

"I think women feel more pressure to achieve," said Christina Thompson, a political science major who plans to go to law school.

Right, said her youngest sister.

"In the past, black women in the South couldn't do much except clean, pick cotton or take care of someone's children," Lynette Thompson said. "I think from our mother we got the feeling we should try to use the opportunities that are available to us now."

They and many other women at Greensboro say it is not bad to be on a campus with twice as many women as men because it encourages them to stick to their studies without the distraction of dating.

Maybe, said Ashleigh Pelick, a freshman who is dating a marine she met before college — but she teased a friend, Madison Barringer: "You know you'll go crazy if you never have another boyfriend before you graduate."

Ms. Barringer, a 19-year-old whose parents did not go to college, laughed. But she did acknowledge the gender imbalance as a possible problem.

"I know it sounds picky, but I don't think I'd marry someone without a college degree," she said. "I want to be able to have that intellectual conversation."

Creating a balance of men and women is now an issue for all but the most elite colleges, whose huge applicant pools let them fill their classes with any desired mix of highly-qualified men and women. But for others, it is a delicate issue. Colleges want balance, both for social reasons and to ensure that they can attract a broad mix of applicants. But they do not want an atmosphere in which talented, hard-working women share classes with less qualified, less engaged men.

The calculus is different at different institutions. By administrators' accounts, American University has been relatively unconcerned to see its student body tipping female, faster than most others.

The admissions office said that its decisions were gender blind, and that it accepted a larger share of female applicants. In an interview, Ivy Broder, the interim provost, seemed surprised, but not bothered, that American had a higher proportion of women than [Vassar College](#), which formerly admitted only women.

American has no engineering school and no football team; it is a campus where the [Democrats'](#) organization is Democratic Women and Friends; "The Vagina Monologues" sells out at annual performances; and almost 1,000 people turned out for the Breastival, a women's health fair.

The faculty is attracting more and more women: a majority of the professors now on the tenure track are female.

Women on campus say there is great female solidarity. What there is not much of, said Gail Short Hanson, the director of campus life, is a dating scene.

Said Ms. Hanson: "If there's a dance, like the Founder's Day dance in February, do the women get their hair done? Yes. Do they get their nails done? Yes. But do they have a date? Probably not. So who do they dance with? Whoever wants to dance."

If American University is comfortable being largely female, that is not the case on Dickinson College's charming but isolated campus in central Pennsylvania. At a time when most colleges are becoming increasingly female, Dickinson has raised its proportion of men. Even rarer is that Dickinson has publicly discussed its quest for gender balance.

#### The Goal: More Male Students

Robert Massa, vice president for enrollment, began campaigning for more male students shortly after he arrived at Dickinson in 1999 and discovered that only 36 percent of the incoming freshmen were male and that the college had accepted 73 percent of the women who applied, but only 53 percent of the men.

Dickinson adapted to the growing female majority by starting a women's center, adding a women's studies major and offering courses on Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf.

In his effort to attract men, Mr. Massa made sure that the admissions materials included plenty of pictures of young men and athletics. Dickinson began highlighting its new physics, computer science and math building, and started a program in international business. Most fundamental, Dickinson began accepting a larger proportion of its male applicants.

"The secret of getting some gender balance is that once men apply, you've got to admit them," Mr. Massa said. "So

did we bend a little bit? Yeah, at the margin, we did, but not to the point that we would admit guys who couldn't do the work."

Longtime Dickinson administrators say that at isolated campuses with their own social worlds, gender balance is especially important.

"When there were fewer men, the environment was not as safe for women," said Joyce Bylander, associate provost. "When men were so highly prized that they could get away with things, some of them become sexual predators. It was an unhealthy atmosphere for women."

In education circles, Mr. Massa is sometimes accused of practicing unfair affirmative action for boys. He has a presentation called "What's Wrong With You Guys?" in which he says that Dickinson does not accept a greater proportion of male than female applicants, and that women still get more financial aid.

"Is this affirmative action?" Mr. Massa said. "Not in the legal sense." He says that admissions to a liberal arts college is more art than science, a matter of crafting a class with diverse strengths.

Mr. Massa reshaped Dickinson in one year. Of the freshmen admitted in 2000, 43 percent were male, and in recent years Dickinson's student body has been about 44 percent male. This year, Dickinson admitted an equal share of the male and the female applicants.

In the Dickinson cafeteria on a spring afternoon, the byplay between two men and two women could provide a text on gender differences. The men, Dennis Nelson and Victor Johnson, African-American football players nearing the end of their junior year, teased each other about never wanting to be seen in the library. They talked about playing "Madden," a football video game, six hours a day, about how they did not spend much time on homework.

"A lot of women want a 4.0 average, and they'll work for it," Mr. Nelson said. "I never wanted it because it's too much work to be worth it. And a lot of women, they have everything planned out for the next three years."

Mr. Johnson jumped in: "Yeah, and it boggles my mind because I don't have my life planned for the next 10 minutes. Women see the long-term benefits, they take their classes seriously, and they're actively learning. We learn for tests. With us, if someone calls the night before and says there's going to be a test, we study enough for a C."

His female friends offered their assessment. "They're really, really smart, and they think they don't have to work," Glenda Cabral said.

But they do. After two years of good grades, Mr. Johnson this year failed Spanish and Arab-Israeli relations.

"He called me the night before the test and asked who Nasser was," Julie Younes said, rolling her eyes.

At Dickinson, as elsewhere, men are overrepresented among the problem students. Of 33 students on probation this year, all but six were male. They account for most disciplinary actions, too.

"If it's outside-the-line behavior, boys are pretty much the ones doing it," Ms. Bylander said. "This generation, and especially the boys, is technology-savvy but interpersonally challenged. They've been highly structured, highly programmed, with organized play groups and organized sports, and they don't know much about how to run their own lives."

#### Disengagement Is Noticed

Men are underrepresented when it comes to graduation and honors. Eighty-three percent of women who were Dickinson freshmen in 2001 graduated four years later, compared with 75 percent of the men. Dickinson women, who made up just over half of last year's graduates, got slightly more than two-thirds of the cum laude, magna and summa degrees.

Since the process of human development crosses all borders, it makes sense that Europe, too, now has more women than men heading to college. The disengagement of young men, though, takes different forms in different cultures. Japan, over the last decade, has seen the emergence of "hikikomori" — young men withdrawing to their rooms, eschewing social life for months or years on end.

At Dickinson, some professors and administrators have begun to notice a similar withdrawal among men who arrive on campus with deficient social skills. Each year, there are several who mostly stay in their rooms, talk to no one, play video games into the wee hours and miss classes until they withdraw or flunk out.

This spring, Rebecca Hammell, dean of freshman and sophomores, counseled one such young man to withdraw.

"He was in academic trouble from the start," Ms. Hammell said. "He was playing games till 3, 4, 5 in the morning, in an almost compulsive way. From early in the year, his teachers reported that he was either not coming to class or falling asleep once he was there. I checked with the Residential Life office, and they said he was in his room all the time."

Of course, female behavior has its own extremes. In freshman women, educators worry about eating disorders and perfectionism.

But among the freshman men, the problems stem mostly from immaturity.

"There was so much freedom when I got here, compared to my very structured high school life, that I kept putting things off," said Greg Williams, who just finished his freshman year. "I wouldn't do much work and I played a lot of Halo. I didn't know how to wake up on time without a mom. I had laundry problems. I shrank all my clothes and had to buy new ones."

Still, men in the work force have always done better in pay and promotions, in part because they tend to work longer hours, and have fewer career interruptions than women, who bear the children and most of the responsibility for raising them.

Whether the male advantage will persist even as women's academic achievement soars is an open question. But many young men believe that, once in the work world, they will prevail.

"I think men do better out in the world because they care more about the power, the status, the C.E.O. job," Mr. Kohn said. "And maybe society holds men a little higher."

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---

--