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How Gender Differences Shape Student Success in Honors

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In 2014, Jonathan Zimmerman published an op-ed in the *Christian Science Monitor* in which he wrote, “The last time I checked, [men] held most of the important positions of power and influence in American society. And yet, college admissions offices lower the standard for young men—effectively raising it for women—simply to make sure that the men keep coming.” This comment was not surprising as, seven years earlier, the *U.S. News & World Report* had published “Many Colleges Reject Women at Higher Rates Than For Men,” in which Alex Kingsbury memorably asserted:

Using undergraduate admissions rate data collected from more than 1,400 four-year colleges and universities that participate in the magazine’s rankings, *U.S. News* has found that over the past 10 years many schools are maintaining their gender balance by admitting men and women at sometimes drastically different rates. The schools that are most competitive—Harvard, Duke, and Rice for example—have so many applicants and so many high achievers that they naturally

maintain balanced student bodies by skimming the cream of the crop. But in the tier of selective colleges just below them, maintaining gender equity on some campuses appears to require a thumb on the scale in favor of boys. It's at these schools, including Pomona, Boston College, Wesleyan University, Tufts, and the College of William and Mary, that the gap in admit rates is particularly acute.

This reality is entrenched in admissions offices that seek a gender balance on campus, and the academic community should consider the ethical and practical consequences of admitting less-qualified men into U.S. colleges. Two important questions are (1) whether the practice of admitting young men with lower grades either validates or undermines the predictive power of the admissions evaluation criteria and (2) whether young men who are by many measures less qualified are as likely to succeed and graduate as their female peers. Those who direct honors colleges and programs need to consider the implications of the gender imbalance for their communities.

Although admissions criteria are not reliably predictive, they do seem to indicate the strength of a student's discipline and organizational maturity. David Sadker, Myra Sadker, and Karen Zittleman—in *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and What We Can Do About It*—argue that young men and women enter college with different expectations that tend to make young men less successful than their female peers, as measured by grades but also by graduation rates. In their words, “College men have fewer intellectual interests and poorer study habits than college women. They enjoy readings books less, take fewer notes, study less, and play more. Despite their lower efforts, lower grades, and lower likelihood of completing a college degree, men evaluate their academic abilities higher than women” (289).

This situation has social outcomes beyond the simple fact that men are less likely to earn a college degree than are their female peers. Young women who go to college in greater numbers, work harder, have stronger transcripts than those of their male peers, and graduate will earn about the same amount as a man with only a high school diploma (Sadker et al. 203). In short, young men who benefitted from an admissions advantage in college are able to parlay that advantage into earning potential that is not justified by the quality of their academic work. The college admissions advantage, then, strengthens long-lived patterns of gender disparity. In this instance, well-intentioned efforts to build diversity at the college level significantly reinforce structural inequalities that disadvantage women. This system is harmful to young men

and women. Young men know that they will achieve fewer social dividends by working harder and can feel entitled to underachieve academically. Young women, by contrast, are in a position of knowing that they will need to work harder to achieve what young men can obtain more easily—beginning with college entrance and following with professional success.

The task for those who work in academia is to ameliorate the fairness of the system for both men and women. Faculty, administrators, and staff need to provide academic support to young men, who are more likely to be underqualified, as well as provide enriched academic opportunities and career support to women over the course of their college experience. Honors programs and colleges can implement best practices that include advisement, mentoring, curriculum structure, and housing that bolster the success of both men and women students. I believe that honors colleges and programs can better serve their students and improve their retention rates by understanding some of the different experiences young men and women face in high school and college.

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Women tend to graduate from high school with stronger transcripts, but young women's academic gains are unevenly distributed across the curriculum. In 1990, the American Association of University Women published its *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* and made the argument that after elementary school, girls fell behind their male classmates in higher-level mathematics courses and in measures of self-esteem (16). Researchers speculate, “[P]erhaps one reason why female test scores tumble is that from elementary school through higher education, female students receive less active classroom instruction, both in the quantity and the quality of teacher time and attention” (Sadker et al. 24). Although less persuasive in explaining the reasons that female grades are elevated in other areas, Sadker et al. indirectly point to the fact that for women priority is placed on achievement and “being quiet, and conforming to school norms” (24).

The broad declines in male academic achievement have tended to draw greater public attention than women's mathematical underachievement and declining self-confidence (Arnot and Mac an Ghaill 5), and the nature of research in these fields is telling. Researchers who study boys argue that they do not fit behavioral and developmental expectations in elementary schools.

These researchers argue that the majority of teachers are women and that their expectations favor girls, who typically have more advanced verbal and reading skills, better fine motor coordination, and greater ability to sit still and stay on task than boys. Implicitly, then, these researchers are arguing that women have made elementary and middle school education antagonistic to boy's needs. In an argument that leans toward essentialist definitions of gender, psychologists Gurian et al. argue that, especially in reading and writing, boys need teachers who allow them access to objects they can manipulate and freedom to move around the classroom and school. Teachers should "encourage and navigate normal Huck Finn male energy toward academic focus and good character" (Gurian et al. 196–97). Despite their problematic assumptions, Gurian et al. have some compelling data: boys are five times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, due in part to unattainable school expectations. Gurian, Henley, and Trueman are part of a broad movement of psychologists and activists who argue that there is a crisis of masculinity in our schools, that resources should be allocated to making schools friendlier to boys, and that methods of teaching should change so that classrooms are better suited to meet the needs of boys. He concludes that teachers should allow boys to be more aggressive at school and should introduce competitive games to keep them engaged in classroom activities. Those who claim a crisis in masculinity often have support from the mainstream media, e.g., the 2006 *Newsweek* article "The Boy Crisis. At Every Level of Education, They're Falling Behind. What To Do?"

A more nuanced argument made by Leonard Sax asserts that our recent focus on standardized testing, as well as our rising expectations for schools, results in a tendency for boys to fall behind early in elementary school. Sax's argument notes that kindergarten's changing emphasis (from building social skills through play to a focus on reading and more academic work) casts into high relief the developmental advantages that girls seem to have early on over boys. Sax asserts, "[I]t now appears that the language areas of the brain in many five-year-old boys look like the language areas of the brain of the average three-and-a-half-year-old girl" (*Boys Adrift* 18). He concludes that boys are not ready to sit, read, and focus in the same way that girls are. Although one might perhaps quibble with the remedy, Sax's proposed solution—that girls and boys be segregated in order that instruction might be tailored to meet their needs—at least acknowledges that men and women confront different learning challenges. Sax suggests that boy's classrooms be more competitive and stricter in terms of discipline; he claims that teachers who fear harming

the self-esteem of girls avoid yelling at students even though yelling might be a good way to motivate boys (*Why Gender Matters* 89–90).

The key for educators who are seeking to remediate society-wide educational needs is to avoid subscribing to a model of redistributive justice (taking from one gender to give to the other) and to think about the unique challenges facing each student. Arnot and Mac an Ghaill assert that any argument about a “crisis in masculinity” is deeply problematic and suggest that worries about boys’ underperformance and underachievement have redirected the focus of educators away from girls. Other scholars have also criticized Gurian and others for overstating the “boy crisis.” According to Sara Mead, the “hysteria” about the boy’s crisis is “partly a matter of perspective.” She argues that in an age of greater gender equality, some people worry that women will surpass men. She also states that the claim of a “boy crisis” lacks solid grounding:

The so-called boy crisis also feeds on a lack of solid information. Although there are a host of statistics about how boys and girls perform in school, we actually know very little about why these differences exist or how important they are. There are many things—including biological, developmental, cultural, and educational factors—that affect how boys and girls do in school. But untangling these different influences is incredibly difficult. (Mead 14)

Clearly, a great debate is afoot about primary and secondary education with some experts arguing that the educational system undermines girls and others arguing that the system disenfranchises boys. Given limited resources in schools, administrators need to know how to best support their students. Ultimately, the secondary educational system in the U.S. does not seem to be meeting the unique needs of young men and women, with the result that neither are able to reach their full potential.

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Psychologists and others who do research on educational development often focus on students under nineteen. Linda Sax’s research provides a challenge to those who educate college students to think more about their needs. While the students who navigated primary and secondary school more successfully than their peers are likely the ones who get to colleges and universities, these students still need support in ways that are particular to their gender, and honors programs and colleges are well-suited to offer students the guidance and help they need.

Linda J. Sax's *The Gender Gap in College* is a survey of 17,000 college students who attend 200 different American colleges. Her data are mostly limited to self-assessment and aspirations but also include student grade point averages. She finds that women in their first year at college rank themselves lower on almost every self-rating than do men (2). Moreover, women attribute their intelligence to hard work and not innate ability. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) found that students who work hard in their studies often perceive themselves as being less able (291). What makes this information striking is that women come to college with higher high school grades, better study habits, and a greater interest in education than do their male peers. Women seem to have the skills but not the confidence. Men often have the confidence but neither the same level of academic preparation nor the strong grades, according to Linda Sax's research (25–27).

The AAUW has conducted considerable research into the classes high school students take and how this coursework prepares them for college. In the 1980s the organization said that teachers should encourage girls to take more math and science courses. By the 1990s, girls took more math and science classes, but they commonly stopped their mathematics education with Algebra II, which did not prepare them sufficiently for Calculus (AAUW 279). This mathematical disadvantage has a real impact upon women's achievement on high-stakes tests of mathematical aptitude, such as the SAT, ACT, MCAT, LSAT, and GRE (Sadker et al. 24) even though girls now complete more college-preparatory math and science courses than boys. (DiPrete and Buchmann, *Rise* 100). While boys take fewer English classes, except for remedial courses, and fewer classes in foreign languages classes, psychology, and sociology, girls take more high school honors courses and outnumber boys in all AP classes except physics; however, girls also drop out of honors courses more rapidly than boys do, which some researchers attribute to cultural priorities (choosing socially acceptable methods of achievement over academic achievement) as well as a lack of confidence (AAUW 290). This information is useful to higher education faculty. Young women and men come to college from the same high schools but with different course trajectories and a different set of experiences. Young men might need additional help in their introductory English classes while young women might need more upper-division options to replace the introductory courses for which they received AP credit. Women might also need guidance in taking preparatory math classes to be ready for calculus or other advanced math and science classes.

When bright and well-prepared girls leave high school, they have already gone through the exasperating process of applying to college and often seeing

themselves rejected from the same schools that admitted the boys sitting next to them who had earned lower grades. Young women also tend to be more willing than young men are to live at home and attend college, which can be helpful to their families but does not cultivate their independence. Linda Sax finds that female students express greater scholarly confidence when they live away from home (82). Young women who commute might not opt for the most competitive colleges, and they may not consider themselves as engaged in the culture of learning. The current economic climate is also making it harder for students to attend the colleges of their choice, and many are opting for schools that offer substantial financial aid even if they are less prestigious institutions.

Women continue to see education as the path to advancement, but more women are coming to college from disadvantaged and poorer backgrounds, and they often lack the support network of family members who have attended college. In contrast, Linda Sax showed that young men entering college in 2006 had family incomes \$12,000 higher than for women (16). Some of these less advantaged women no doubt attend local colleges where they receive the best financial aid, have a better academic profile than their peers, and feel little connection to the campus as commuters.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR HONORS EDUCATORS

Women who enter college are “slightly overrepresented” at less competitive colleges with higher acceptance rates, lower standardized test scores, and lower fees (Jacobs 155). Honors programs and colleges often thrive at institutions because of the high-caliber women who, often for financial or personal reasons, attend them. High-achieving young women populate honors programs and colleges because they want to get the most out of their education even if they do not attend the most competitive institution that admitted them. The job of honors directors and faculty members is to create dynamic and challenging environments for their students, the majority of whom are female.

Every fall about one million students begin their college careers at institutions across the country, and universities award 57.4 percent of bachelor’s degrees to women (Tyre 6). Women outnumber men at most institutions of higher learning, and the percentage of women in honors is usually higher than their overall enrollment percentile. In 2013, the National Collegiate Honors Council gathered data from 890 institutions and found that the percentage of undergraduate females in institutions as a whole averaged 56.6 compared to

64.7 for honors programs and colleges. Knowing that more women than men are involved in honors at most institutions should encourage honors directors to develop their programs in ways to enhance the experiences of women. Honors provides pedagogical innovation in supportive communities, and it should model best practices for young scholars in ways that compensate for the shortcomings of secondary education. Honors directors can offer mentorships, leadership opportunities, and enhanced academic support to their female and male students (Linda Sax 26), and they can design curricula and communities to keep the best and brightest students engaged and academically successful.

Honors faculty and directors should be aware of research indicating that young men and women understand academic success and failure differently. Eva Pomerantz et al. argue:

Girls generalize the meaning of their failures because they interpret them as indicating that they have disappointed adults, and thus they are of little worth. Boys, in contrast, appear to see their failures as relevant only to the specific subject area in which they have failed; this may be due to their relative lack of concern with pleasing adults. In addition, because girls view evaluative feedback as diagnostic of their abilities, failure may lead them to incorporate this information into their more general view of themselves. Boys, in contrast, may be relatively protected from such generalization because they see such feedback as limited in its diagnosticity. (402)

Honors programs and colleges can be places where young women are encouraged to take academic risks, reassess the meaning of failure, and develop self-confidence. To accomplish this objective, honors deans, directors, and faculty need to understand how young women interpret the feedback they receive at their universities.

Linda Sax found that women's self-confidence decreases as they progress through college (79) whereas this should be a time to regain their self-esteem and acquire the skills needed to succeed in the workplace. Honors programs are an ideal venue to bolster the confidence of young women before they head to graduate school or a job. As NCHC Fellow Charlie Slavin made clear, "[M]ore than any other administrators, honors directors and deans are personally involved with the faculty, students, curricula, and graduates of their programs and colleges" (17). Honors directors are thus in a position to develop programs to support female scholars. As Linda Sax points out, honors courses

increase the level of academic engagement of all students and are important in developing a strong sense of scholarly accomplishment (182).

Honors programs can instill in young women the confidence possessed by their male peers. Shelly Correll's work indicates that men pursue challenging subjects in part because they believe in their abilities to do so. Her sociological research indicates that when she assigns men and women a task and tells them that their abilities are equal, the men perceive that they will do the task better. Correll argues that "men make higher assessments of their own mathematical ability than women, which contributes to their higher rates of persistence on paths to careers in science, math, and engineering" (93). Women do not enter these fields in the numbers that men do, but by encouraging women to take more challenging math courses and offering them support, honors directors might help motivate more female students to enter the STEM fields.

"Women continue to lag far behind men in engineering and physical science degrees even as they have achieved parity or an advantage in elite fields such as medicine, law, and the biological and life sciences" (DiPrete and Buchmann, *Rise* 198). Clearly, women do enter traditionally male fields when they are supported in their efforts to do so. Both high schools and universities can cultivate more women in STEM fields through interactions with faculty from these disciplines.

Recent research demonstrates that college-bound girls largely form their orientations toward physical science, engineering, or mathematical fields of study by the end of high school. Girls who have signaled an intention to major in one of these fields by this point are just as likely as boys to graduate from college with a STEM degree. But girls are much less likely than boys to enter their fields in colleges if they have not already declared an interest in STEM by high school. (DiPrete and Buchmann, *Rise* 198–99)

Honors deans and directors can, for instance, forge partnerships at feeder high schools to encourage girls to consider degrees and careers in STEM fields.

Honors can cultivate high-achieving students academically and personally in many different ways. Students who lack confidence in their academic abilities need a supportive atmosphere that takes them seriously as scholars and encourages them to pursue difficult subjects and challenging careers. Linda Sax's research shows that students thrive when they have close contact with faculty members but that female students respond more negatively than males when faculty do not take their ideas seriously (207). Therefore, women

need to create meaningful relationships with faculty who will recognize and support their ideas as they get to know them better and serve as their mentors. Honors programs often have a body of faculty who are interested in working with high-achieving students in classes and on research projects, getting to know students well and mentoring them closely. When students form strong bonds with faculty, they can get research experience and meaningful recommendation letters that lead to success in later education and beyond.

Honors programs can encourage students to pursue a diversity of majors by creating a culture that supports and encourages students to take academic risks. Girls are taking more math and science courses in high school, but fewer women pursue math and science degrees when they get to college. According to David and Myra Sadker and Karen Zittlemen, “something happens along the way to undo girls’ progress, to derail these careers. . . . In large numbers, they [have] turned away from careers in engineering, the physical or computer sciences” (171).

In an essay about women in the Western Washington University Honors College, honors director George Mariz explains that at his institution women earned 57.2 percent of all bachelor’s degrees in 2002 but only 38 percent of those in mathematics, engineering, biological sciences, physical sciences, and computer science (96). Mariz further explains that women outnumber men by about two to one in his program, and 36 percent of them take degrees in the natural sciences: “Among Honors students, women constituted an astonishing 94% of the environmental science degrees, 79% of those in biology, and 50% each of those in chemistry, physics, and mathematics” (Mariz, 97). Moreover, Mariz found that women in honors outnumbered men three to one in getting into medical school. Following this example, honors directors might think of ways to make their programs hospitable places for students pursuing non-stereotypical areas of study, whether women in physics or men in nursing.

Gayle E. Hartleroad was interested in the success rates of first-year female engineering students at Purdue University and compared the GPAs of female students in the honors program to those who were not in honors. About 20% of engineering students at Purdue were women, and the university wanted to retain them. Hartleroad found a significant difference in the students’ GPAs: those in honors earned an average first-year GPA of 3.42 while those not in honors earned a 2.80. Hartleroad interviewed female engineering students and found that they felt isolated in classes dominated by men and thought that the honors program would offer women more support. She stated, “It

was believed that attracting these students to a welcoming honors program that offered a supportive environment, a challenging practical application of engineering concepts, and a realistic view of the engineering profession would accomplish this goal” of improving retention (110). Honors clearly has a role to play in encouraging women to pursue STEM degrees by providing a nurturing environment that decreases women’s feelings of isolation and increasing their self-confidence.

In our enthusiasm to address the needs of women, we need to remember that the needs of the young men coming to college are likely to be quite different. They tend to have more confidence, which may well lead them to take healthy academic risks but can lead them away from seeking support. The result is that young men are often ill-prepared to recognize that they are less likely than their female peers to have the skills necessary to meet the challenges posed by college courses.

Men’s unrealistic perceptions inhibit them from self-improvement. Men spend more time playing video games and sports, partying, and watching television than women do. . . . How can colleges help males balance their leisurely interests with academic pursuits? How can we help men understand that reading and studying are important activities?” (Sadker et al. 246)

While young men should not lose entertainment and athletic outlets, honors directors need to create a culture that enables young men to evaluate their performance more accurately and that helps them to find academic support resources. In the program that I helped to develop at William Paterson University between 2005 and 2015, I tried to have a good number of male mentors living in residence to serve as role models for first-year students in the honors learning community. Jennifer Delahunty-Britz, admissions director at Kenyon College, asked in a 2006 essay, “What are the consequences of young men discovering that even if they do less, they have more options?” Honors directors need to expect more of young men in our programs, providing the academic support and nurturing environment that they need to improve their academic skills but also making sure that they understand the consequences of their choices about studying and playing. Honors directors also need to work at cultivating young men’s love of learning, encouraging them to be more serious in their studies, and, according to Tracy Davis and Jason A. Laker, appreciating the “multiple dimensions of identity” young men bring to college in order to offer them “appropriate levels of challenge and support” (55).

At William Paterson University, I worked with the registrar to place honors students in their first-semester classes, most of which are clusters of honor courses. Typically, three courses meet back to back with the same group of students staying together for the morning or afternoon two or three times a week. Once a week all three faculty members stay for the duration of the cluster to permit cross-disciplinary discussions, larger-scale debates, or off-campus field trips. Most professors who teach in honors clusters are full-time faculty, and many teach upper-division honors courses. These faculty members teach introductory classes for the honors students so that they get to know them early in their careers and can begin to mentor them. The cluster provides a place for students to get to know each other well, which is particularly helpful for commuters, and it provides a close connection to three members of the faculty. The clusters help students create strong ties to campus during their first term when retention is especially important. I have had students in their senior year tell me that their first-semester cluster was the most important academic experience they had on campus.

In many ways, the cluster teaches students how to do the difficult work demanded of them in college. They learn together how to “do college.” Every fall the clusters organize trips for the students that are relevant to their classes; in the past year, students have been to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cloisters Museum, Ground Zero, and Ellis Island. Although most of our students are from New Jersey, many have not spent much time in New York, and experiencing the City shows them that it is a safe and exciting place twenty miles east of campus. These off-site experiences expand the students’ academic horizons and help them develop as citizens of the world within a group that begins to define itself as scholarly.

The clustering of honors courses works well for young men in my honors college because they are with a group of students who expect them to attend class, arrive on time, and do their homework. Moreover, they work closely with faculty in these courses and can receive individualized guidance without feeling that the instructors are singling them out for help. The residential community is also important because the men live with a large number of women, who organize study groups that they can join. I find that our male honor students initially avoid tutoring but are willing to participate in study groups or work with study partners, eventually making their way to the science and math enrichment centers. Living in the learning community puts them into a space that is reasonably quiet, that has few distractions, and where most students have high expectations for their academic performance. According to

Alexander Astin, “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (398). Honors directors can take advantage of peer group influence by designing curricular and co-curricular programs that help students develop good study habits and work together for academic success (Astin 427).

Students enroll in honors programs for many reasons, including the promise of enhanced academic experiences and scholarships. Honors programs are ideally situated not only to fulfill these promises but also to give students opportunities for personal as well as academic growth. Institutions benefit from having students who improve their academic profile and enrich the quality of classes; in return, these students deserve a dynamic, challenging, and nurturing educational community. If students are bored academically and cannot connect with other strong students, they will not thrive and may well leave the institution. If students are perpetually stressed or feel that their instructors do not care about their success, they may also leave the institution. As the cost of higher education rises, more families are sending their students to less expensive state schools, most of which have honors programs or colleges as a way to woo high-achieving students. These students, whether male or female, need to know that honors offers them a thoughtful and intense educational experience that addresses their individual needs.

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