Study: Higher education playing bigger role in gender wage gap

August 9 2009, by Jeff Grabmeier

While higher education has helped women narrow their long-running wage gap with men, there is one college-related factor that has becoming increasingly important in perpetuating that gap, according to new research.

And that factor is college major.

Women are still segregated into college majors that will lead them to careers with less pay than men, said Donna Bobbitt-Zeher, author of the study and assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State University at Marion.

"Gender segregation in college is becoming more influential in how men and women are rewarded later in life," Bobbitt-Zeher said.

"If you really want to eliminate earnings inequality, college major segregation is a piece of the puzzle that really stands out."

The findings are especially important now because many people assume that, if anything, college helps women more than it helps men nowadays.

"A lot of people look at data showing that women are more likely to go to college than men, and that women get better grades in college than men, and assume that everything is all right," she said.

"But this research suggests there are still problems for women that relate

to college."

Bobbitt-Zeher presented her research August 9 in San Francisco at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

She used data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. With these data sets, she was able to compare women who graduated from high school in 1972 and 1992. She compared the incomes of college graduates seven years after their high school graduations, in 1979 and 1999. Both samples included about 10,000 cases.

Findings showed the income gap between college-educated men and women declined significantly in 20 years - in 1979, women's earnings were 78 percent of their male counterparts, but by 1999 the women were earning 83 percent as much as men.

Using well-accepted statistical techniques, Bobbitt-Zeher estimated how much of that income difference between men and women was explained by various factors in 1979 versus 1999. Some of the factors she examined included occupations and industries that men and women work in; background, including socioeconomic status and race; how much individuals valued earning a lot of money; factors related to parental and martial status; SAT scores; the colleges that people attended and whether they earned graduate degrees; and, of course, the percentage of women in their college majors.

Findings showed that about 19 percent of the income gap between college-educated men and women in 1999 could be explained by their college major - nearly twice as much as in 1979, when 10 percent of the gap was explained by college major.

Although work-related characteristics combine to explain a bigger share

of the gap, no other single known factor was more important than college major in explaining the income gap in 1999.

In addition, college major is the only factor explaining a substantial part of the income gap that increased in importance between 1979 and 1999.

"What this suggests is that college major segregation is becoming more important for wage inequality than it used to be," Bobbitt-Zeher said.

Many college majors did become more integrated between 1979 and 1999, she noted.

"Most of integration has come from women making different choices, rather than men moving into traditionally female fields," Bobbitt-Zeher said.

However, significant differences remain in the majors women and men choose. And this is contributing to the gender income gap in a more meaningful way than it did in the past.

The continuing wage gap isn't explained completely by men choosing majors that require greater skills than majors chosen by women, she said.

"Gender composition of majors is a stronger influence on the gender income gap than is the content of the field of study," according to Bobbitt-Zeher.

The reasons for the gender segregation of majors are not entirely understood, she said. Personal choice could play a role, or it could be that girls are still influenced to pursue "women-appropriate" majors. Programs that encourage girls to pursue scientific careers may be part of the answer.

But Bobbitt-Zeher said the results should be a reminder for us not to believe gender inequality in higher education is a problem of the past.

"There's been a lot of attention paid to the fact that women seem to be doing so well in college compared to men. But what people don't know is that education is playing a bigger role than ever in perpetuating the gender income gap," she said.

"It's an issue that we need to keep at the forefront."

Source: The Ohio State University (news : web)

Citation: Study: Higher education playing bigger role in gender wage gap (2009, August 9) retrieved 19 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2009-08-higher-bigger-role-gender-wage.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.