

Better Grades And Greater Incentives Help Explain Why Women Outpace Men In College Degrees

September 19 2006

Girls have long gotten better grades than boys in all levels of school. But while at one time few women used those academic skills to get degrees, new research suggests that growing incentives are helping draw women to college in record numbers.

That helps explain why, since 1982, women have outpaced men in college graduation rates. In 2004, women received 58 percent of all bachelor's degrees in the United States, compared to only 35 percent in 1960.

“What has changed is that more women are now using their longstanding academic advantages and translating them into college degrees,” said Claudia Buchmann, co-author of the studies and associate professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

“In the 1960s and 70s, girls were getting better grades, but many young women were not going to college, or they were dropping out of college to get married. Now the benefits of a college education are growing faster for women than they are for men, and women are taking advantage.”

Buchmann conducted the research with Thomas DiPrete, professor of sociology at Columbia University . Their results appear in the August 2006 issue of the *American Sociological Review*, and the February 2006

issue of *Demography*.

In the ASR article, the researchers examined data about students from around the country participating in the National Education Longitudinal Study. These were students born in 1973-74, who were college age in 1992. They were followed through 2000.

The researchers found that girls did better academically than boys in both 8th grade and in high school. Still, boys were just as likely as girls to enroll in a four-year college (52 percent of girls in the sample, compared to 51 percent of boys). But women were significantly more likely to graduate. Overall, 63 percent of women who enrolled in four-year colleges graduated, compared to 55 percent of men.

And the advantage for women was not because they were taking easier majors, or because women used different pathways than men to graduation, such as starting at two-year colleges, the findings showed.

“Women are more likely to graduate from college in large part because of their superior academic performance while in college,” she said.

Buchmann noted that since the NELS data were collected, women have gained a lead in college enrollment, as well as graduation. In the fall of 2002, 55 percent of students enrolling in 4-year colleges were women.

The news is not all bad for boys. The number of young men enrolling in and graduating from college has risen in the past 30 years, but very slowly compared to the women's rate.

Results from the ASR study showed, however, that boys from some types of families are more likely to be left behind. The male disadvantage in earning a college degree is largest for those who grew up in households with a low-educated or absent father.

But the findings showed that women from families with a low-educated or absent father had the biggest increase in college enrollment and graduation.

“There were cultural changes in the United States for women born in the late 1960s, particularly those with less educated parents,” she said. “They started to see greater benefits in a college education, and they took that opportunity.”

Buchmann said it is unclear why young men were less likely to complete college in families with absent or low-educated fathers, but young women were not.

“It may be that some of these men are under financial stress to help support their families and leave college to get a job. Or perhaps they believe they can still get a good-paying blue-collar job without a college degree. We can't tell from the data,” she said.

“But this is a small part of the overall picture. The biggest reason for the gender gap in the graduation rate is that women are doing better in college.”

So if girls have long done better academically than boys in elementary and high school, why has women's college graduation rate only surpassed men's in the past 25 years?

Much of it has to do with the incentives for women to get a college degree, Buchmann said.

In their Demography paper, Buchmann and DiPrete studied data from the March Current Population Survey from 1964 to 2002. The sample included men and women aged 25 to 34.

In this study, the researchers found that women are now getting more from a college degree than are men.

“For all the types of returns except personal earnings, women's returns to higher education have risen faster than those of men,” Buchmann said.

For example, the standard-of-living gain for those with a college degree compared to those with a high school diploma was 13 percent larger for women than for men between 1990 and 2000, results showed.

Even though they are still not paid as well as men, with a decline in gender discrimination in the workplace, college-educated women are paid better now than they have ever been. And the benefits go beyond pay.

Compared to women whose education ended after high school, those with college degrees have a higher probability of getting married and staying married, and marrying a highly educated man with a higher income. Moreover, they have a higher standard of living, and greater insurance against poverty, the study showed.

In addition, women who get divorced have a better standard of living if they have a college degree.

“The generation of women who were born in the 1960s were the first to see their mothers getting divorced and having few options in the labor market. Many of these women were likely thinking they wanted to avoid that situation by getting a college degree,” she said.

With all these greater incentives to earn a bachelor's degree, it is not surprising that more women are choosing to go to college, Buchmann said. And their better academic preparation helps ensure that they succeed at rates greater than that of men.

The findings explaining the growing gender gap in the college graduation rate are most applicable to whites. While the gap also occurs among minorities, the same explanations didn't hold up as well in these populations.

“We need to do more research to understand what is happening with minorities,” Buchmann said.

Source: by Jeff Grabmeier, Ohio State University

Citation: Better Grades And Greater Incentives Help Explain Why Women Outpace Men In College Degrees (2006, September 19) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-09-grades-greater-incentives-women-outpace.html>

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