

Women have the numbers but find college is still a struggle

September 18 2008, By Kathy Wyer

(PhysOrg.com) -- Women may maintain a numerical advantage over men at U.S. colleges and universities, but they also experience greater economic hardship, higher levels of stress and less academic confidence, according to new UCLA research.

With national attention focused on the gender gap on college campuses, UCLA associate professor of education Linda J. Sax has examined the impact of college experiences on a number of outcomes for both men and women — including academic achievement, life goals, career development, physical and emotional health, and political and social attitudes — and has found that numbers do not tell the whole story.

Her new book, "The Gender Gap in College: Maximizing the Developmental Potential of Women and Men" (Jossey-Bass 2008), also reveals that while men lag behind women in overall numbers and enter college less academically engaged, they have a higher median family income, are more strongly influenced by their interactions with faculty and show greater gains in intellectual self-confidence.

Drawing on data from surveys of approximately 17,000 students at 200 four-year colleges and universities nationwide conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, "The Gender Gap in College" adds much-needed context to what have become oversimplified and often-repeated messages — that gender equity has been achieved, that women are an academic success story and that men are experiencing an educational

crisis.

"Although there is some truth to each of these messages," Sax says, "they tend to convey the status of women and men as a zero-sum game: If one gender is succeeding, the other must be failing. The reality is that both genders face obstacles and challenges in their pursuit of higher education, and it is incumbent upon the higher education community to have a deeper understanding of the nuances and implications of the college experience for both women and men."

Among the book's key findings:

Economic gender gap

As more women from lower socioeconomic classes attend college, the average income of female students has fallen further behind that of males. While family incomes were equivalent for women and men in the 1960s, the last 40 years have seen median family income for men attending four-year institutions rise by 42 percent, compared with only 16 percent for women.

Academic achievement and self-confidence

Despite the fact that women earn better grades and exhibit a stronger academic orientation than men, they tend to suffer from comparatively low academic confidence. Women rate themselves lower than men on nearly every assessment of academic ability: 52.2 percent rated themselves "above average" or in the "highest 10%" in intellectual ability, compared with 68.8 percent of men; only 35.9 percent of women rated themselves "above average" or in the "highest 10%" in mathematical ability, compared with 53.1 percent of men. These differences become wider throughout college — men gain more intellectual self-confidence than women and women experience greater declines in mathematical confidence.

Academic engagement

Women's superior record of academic achievement and intellectual engagement holds steady over the course of college, and they place greater value than men on the intellectual benefits of attending college, with 80.6 percent reporting that they value the opportunity to learn more about what interests them, compared with 72.1 percent of men. While 63.1 percent of women see college as an opportunity to become well-prepared for graduate school, only 51 percent of men do. Although men are less academically engaged than women, they report that the influence of that engagement is stronger. Specifically, time spent preparing for class has a greater impact on men's grades, academic confidence, critical-thinking skills and achievement motivation than on women's.

Interaction with faculty

In the classroom, women who feel that faculty do not take their comments seriously tend to become less interested in attending graduate school and less confident in their mathematical abilities, and they feel more negatively about their physical health. Yet women who report receiving what they perceive as honest feedback from faculty experience an improved sense of physical health and stronger achievement motivation. Interestingly, women who more frequently challenge professors' ideas in class report higher levels of stress at the end of college, while male students who do the same become less stressed over time.

The study also suggests that faculty have a greater influence on men's political and social awareness. Men who interact more frequently with faculty outside class tend to become more liberal in their political ideologies, more committed to promoting racial understanding and more knowledgeable about national and local issues.

Health and well-being

Women enter college with higher levels of stress and lower self-ratings

of psychological well-being than men. More than twice as many women as men — 38 percent, compared with 17.3 percent — report feeling frequently overwhelmed by their responsibilities. This may result from women's wide range of commitments, which include studying, community service (85.8 percent of women, 77.5 percent of men), involvement in student clubs and groups (37 percent of women report spending three or more hours a week engaged in such activities, compared with 25.8 percent of men) and family responsibilities (65.6 percent of women, 51.7 percent of men).

Men, however, spend more time engaged in what can be considered stress-relieving activities. They are more likely than women to spend more than six hours a week on sports and exercise (58.9 percent of men, 44 percent of women), partying (25.6 percent of men, 18.9 percent of women), watching television (30.8 percent of men, 22.6 percent of women) and playing video games (22 percent of men, 3.8 percent of women).

Selection of majors and careers

Consistent with trends observed over several decades, women are more likely than men to pursue majors and careers in elementary education and health-related professions like nursing, while a greater percentage of men pursue majors and careers in engineering, computer programming and business.

However, historical trends have been reversed in the areas of medicine and law — fields once dominated by men — which now attract equal or greater numbers of women: 7.9 percent of women and 6.4 percent of men plan to become a doctors or dentists; 4 percent of women and 3.8 percent of men aspire to a career in law. There is also greater gender parity when it comes to interest in careers in secondary education, a field once dominated by women: 5.4 percent of women and 4.8 percent of men expressed interest in such careers.

Remaining close to home

Though there is virtually no difference in the distance male and female students travel to college, women are more likely than men to select a college because it is closer to home: 21.5 percent of women, compared with 14.1 percent of men, cite proximity to home as a "very important" reason for choosing a school. Yet leaving home may be especially beneficial for female students, who experience greater scholarly confidence, stronger leadership skills and a greater sense of emotional well-being when they attend college further from their families.

Provided by UCLA

Citation: Women have the numbers but find college is still a struggle (2008, September 18)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-09-women-college-struggle.html>

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