

# Men gave more talks than women at top 50 universities in US

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Male professors gave more than twice as many talks as female professors in departments at the country's 50 most prestigious universities during the 2013-2014 academic year, according to new research from Rice

University, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and the City University of New York.

"Gender Disparities in Colloquium Speakers at Top Universities" is published by the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Departmental talks (or colloquia) are academic presentations in which researchers are invited to a university to present and discuss their work with colleagues and students.

Christine Nittrouer, a graduate student in the Department of Psychology at Rice and the study's lead author, said she and her fellow authors decided to research the topic because such talks are important to the careers of academics and the dearth of female speakers at colloquia that they had attended. Michelle Hebl, the Martha and Henry Malcolm Lovett Chair of Psychology at Rice and one of the study's authors, called colloquium presentations "an important career-building activity."

"These talks can have a significant impact on researchers who are selected to give them," she said. "Talks can validate one's standing as a respected researcher, draw attention to one's programmatic research and latest findings, increase chances of research collaborations and/or promotions and open doors to new and better career opportunities."

The researchers examined 3,652 talks given during the 2013-2014 academic year at the top 50 U.S. research public and private universities as defined by U.S. News and World Report. They focused on talks by professors of biology, bioengineering, history, political science, psychology and sociology, as those disciplines have greater numbers of [women](#) than other fields.

They found that male professors gave 69 percent of talks and women gave 31 percent. The research also showed that the gender difference did not depend on faculty rank. Whether the speaker was an assistant,

associate or full professor, the speakers were more likely men, the findings showed consistently.

To determine whether the gender difference was due to preference differences between men and women, the researchers also surveyed a random subsample of the potential available pool of speakers. The pool included 19,355 potential faculty speakers (12,538 males and 6,817 females)

from the top 100 universities in the U.S. as defined by U.S. News and World Report, but it did not include the 3,652 speakers who gave talks. The researchers concluded that those who gave talks already believed doing so was worthwhile.

"We thought it was possible that women didn't value the importance of such opportunities as much as men did, or that women might turn down invitations more than men did," Hebl said. "We wanted to be sure that our results were not due to motivational differences."

The researchers found men and women were equally likely to believe that colloquia were important and were equally likely to accept speaking invitations. "Different preferences between men and women did not seem to be responsible for the gender discrepancy in colloquium talks," Nittrouer said.

A second hypothesis involved those doing the inviting—the gatekeepers who invited speakers. The researchers approached academic departments at the top 50 universities to determine who made decisions regarding [speaker](#) invitations. In some cases, a single person chose the colloquia speakers and in others a committee was responsible. When a single person was involved, female chairs sponsored talks in which 49 percent of speakers were women, while male chairs sponsored [talks](#) in which only 30 percent of speakers were women. The trend for

committees was similar: Those that had a greater percentage of women were more likely to choose female speakers.

Hebl said this research has implications that transcend academia.

"Our research shows gatekeepers, whether inadvertently or not, can tilt the proportions in who gets to present their research in meaningful, high-profile situations," she said. "The implications extend beyond academia. For example, when organizations choose someone to lead a coveted work project, to participate in a valuable developmental experience or engage in some other limited workplace opportunity, they may similarly inadvertently tilt the balance in favor of men. If we want to be egalitarian, including female representation on the committee can help."

As to whether reducing the bias is possible, Nittrouer said the first step to reduce bias is bringing awareness to the issue. "Before we can eradicate the bias, it's important for people to fully understand how it is operating in both the colloquium context as well as other potential contexts," she said.

"It makes sense that disparities happen, because women have more women in their networks than men do," Hebl said. "This calls for us to be aware of who we offer opportunities to, rather than assume that men and women differ in their desire to excel. That may be the case in some situations, but it does not explain what happened in our study."

**More information:** Christine L. Nittrouer et al, Gender disparities in colloquium speakers at top universities, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2017). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1708414115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1708414115)

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