

High GPA could work against young women job hunters

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Credit: The Ohio State University

Stellar grades in college could hurt - rather than help - women new to the job market, according to a new study that suggests employers place more value on the perceived "likability" of female applicants than on their academic success.

Male applicants with high grade point averages were twice as likely to be contacted by employers as [women](#) with the same grades and comparable experience and educational background in a study from The Ohio State University.

The picture was even worse for women who majored in math. Male math majors who excelled in school were called back by employers three times as often as their women counterparts.

Furthermore, a survey of 261 hiring managers found that while employers value competence and commitment among men applicants, they are prone to gravitate toward women applicants who are perceived as likable - those who did fine, but did not excel, academically. This helps women who are moderate achievers and are often described as sociable and outgoing, but hurts high-achieving

women, who are met with more skepticism, the study found.

"We like to think that we've progressed past gender inequality, but it's still there. The study suggests that women who didn't spend a lot of time on academics but are 'intelligent enough' have an advantage over women who excel in school," said researcher Natasha Quadlin, an assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State. Her study will appear in the April edition of the journal *American Sociological Review*.

"There's a particularly strong bias against female math majors—women who flourish in male-dominated fields—perhaps because they're violating gender norms in terms of what they're supposed to be good at."

The 2,106 [job seekers](#) in the study weren't actual people - they were invented for purposes of the research, but the employers advertising for entry-level positions didn't know that. Each "applicant" had a corresponding email address and phone number.

Quadlin created resumes for freshly graduated job seekers of both genders, using names common to the regions where she sent their applications. Some majored in math, an area traditionally thought of as male dominated; some in English, which skews female; and some in business, which is considered gender-neutral according to a survey she conducted prior to distributing the applications.

Quadlin used an online employment database to find entry-level jobs that weren't specific to the applicants' majors. For each job posting she selected, she sent two applications - one from a man and one from a woman. Both applications included similar cover letters, academic history and participation in gender-neutral extracurricular activities.

When she looked at callbacks based on gender alone, Quadlin didn't find a significant difference. But disparities emerged when she compared men and women with GPAs in the A/A-minus range. Men were called back at approximately the same rate regardless of their GPA, but the callback rate dropped for women with higher GPAs.

On the high-achievement end, discrepancies were seen for math majors, but not for business or English majors.

In the second part of her study, the survey of hiring managers, Quadlin found clear evidence of discrepancies in how they perceived male applicants and female applicants when gender was the only thing that set them apart from each other.

The employers gave feedback on how likely they would be to hire an individual based on a resume alone. They also shared perceptions about individuals' personal traits based on the contents of the resumes, including GPAs.

"Men were more likely to get a call back if they were seen as having more competence and commitment, but only 'likability' seemed to benefit women," Quadlin said. And likability, she added, is associated with moderate academic achievement.

The study didn't target high-paying, more-prestigious jobs, and that could change the outcomes, Quadlin said.

Employers should consider biases they may not even realize they have when sorting through applications, Quadlin said.

"Most people probably aren't aware that they're making these kinds of gender-based decisions," she said.

As for women in college or just beyond, Quadlin doesn't advise aiming for mediocrity in the interest of employment. Instead, she said, high-achieving women should value the types of employers who value them.

"These are the people who will be advocates for you throughout your career - those who support

you early on and appreciate your intelligence and hard work."

More information: Natasha Quadlin. The Mark of a Woman's Record: Gender and Academic Performance in Hiring, *American Sociological Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0003122418762291](https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418762291)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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