TEN REASONS WHY MEN AREN'T GOING TO COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the gender gap in college enrollment rates, as well as why males are lagging in academic persistence and performance. The article looks at these disparities from both a community college perspective which, because of its broad accessibility, reveals challenges faced by a wide demographic spectrum of males, and also at four year colleges where anti-male sentiment is becoming more structuralized. Many of the contributing causes, such as gender differences in language development, begin at earlier ages, so the article extends its search for causes into K through 12 educational settings.

Keywords: Education gender gap, College gender gap, men in college, college graduation rates and gender, academic achievement and gender

INTRODUCTION

The gap between the number of males and females in U.S. colleges and universities continues to widen. In 2016, an estimated 57.3% of bachelor degrees were awarded to women, 42.4% to men (Perry). The gender gap in associate degrees was predicted to be even wider. Despite the fact that this disparity has attracted national attention by widening almost yearly for the past three decades, there has been little discussion of possible causes.

As director, since 1996, of one of the few Men's Centers at a U.S. college, I've had a vested interest in this growing gender chasm. A community college's broader accessibility perhaps best showcases the wider spectrum of challenges men face in pursuing higher education. But the gender disparity in graduation and success rates exists about equally for two-year and four-year colleges, and many of the root causes are the same.

Below are ten reasons why men may not be going to college or---when they do---why they are less likely than women to graduate.

1. The allure of a "good job" out of high school

There are arguably still more high paying jobs for a male high school graduate than a female. But these are the jobs in our post-industrial economy that are in decline. Moreover, these jobs are usually either hazardous, manufacturing based, physically demanding, or all three. What happens to that high school graduate (or drop out), ten, twenty, thirty years later?

For some, their jobs are "off-shored" to Mexico or Asia. Or, they lose out to automation. For others, their bodies become damaged, or worn out, and they must seek less rigorous work. Whichever the case, if they are the primary breadwinners in their families, it is problematic for them to divert time from wage earning to "re-tooling" their skills, whether at the local community college or public four-year university. Most often, they will accept a lower paying job in lieu of additional education, sacrificing long term career development. To make up the loss in income, their spouses must often increase their contribution to the family income. Or, as a family, they make do with less.

When we do see displaced workers as new students, it is usually after a futile employment search. Despite fears of inadequacy or feeling out of place, as first-time students they tend to do well academically. But too often, part way through their first or second semester, I get the call: "I'm not going to be able to finish the semester; I just got a new job." The siren call to provide for their families---or rather the desire to rid themselves of the daily depression of being a failed provider---kicks in.

2. *The gender cleansing of "boy behavior" in kindergarten through 12th grades.*

Zero tolerance policies (zero conflict, zero threatening language, zero agitation, zero noise, zero boisterous activity, etc.) were vigorously introduced in the 1990s to respond to a potentially less secure environment. But since these policies largely target boys---90% of discipline problems (Gurian, 57)---one wonders: what are the effects of the systematic suppression of boy behaviors in our schools?

In their respective books on boys, Michael Gurian and Christina Hoff Sommers have expressed concern that the "pathologizing" of boy behaviors has contributed to a classroom of suppression. This notably includes restrictions on movement which can negatively affect boys'---who have a greater reliance on a kinesthetic learning style---ability to absorb academic lessons. Adding to this are restrictions on outside recess, both in terms of time allocated and in the widespread curbing of competitive playground games favored by boys. Restrictive classroom and school policies gained momentum in the 1980s culminating in the zero tolerance craze of the 1990s. Not surprisingly, according to a University of Michigan study, the number of boys who said they disliked school rose 71% between 1980 and 2001 (Tyre, 46).

3. *Education as a factor in career success is more important to women.*

Perceiving that the workplace is still a man's world, the female students I talk to generally believe that they need all the educational "backing" they can obtain in order to succeed professionally. Indeed, according to the Dept. of Education, eighth-grade and twelfth-grade girls are more likely to have higher educational aspirations (Gurian, p. 56).

But women also have more options. As Warren Farrell has pointed out in *The Myth of Male Power*, when a young single woman and a young single man meet, they appear to be equals (p. 52). But if they should marry, the woman usually has more choices: she can work, mother full-time, or some combination of the two. By contrast, the male generally has one option: work full-time. One might add a fourth option for women: if her husband's income permits it, attend college. This may happen after their children attain a certain age. If, before returning to work, a full-time mother already possesses an undergraduate degree, then it might be a graduate degree that she pursues.

Despite a steady, if very incremental increase in stay-at-home dads, these gender propensities remain strongly delineated. In Australia, a Productivity Commission study showed that men and women still substantially embrace a traditional division of labor (Gilfillan and Andrews p, 26) Women in general still assume men will take the lead as providers, which can lead to a difference in educational opportunities. The expectation is true even of professional women. It is a well known caveat of online dating services that men who fail to include "financially secure" in their profile – or some assurance of career success – are unlikely to get many dates.

4. Title IX.

This controversial federal education amendment was enacted in 1972 to address discrimination on campuses on the basis of sex. It has primarily been employed to make federal funding contingent on how compliantly inter-collegiate sports participation reflects gender enrollment ratios. If a college has 58% female enrollment, then having less than 58% women in its varsity athletic programs can be judged as unlawful sex discrimination. Yet we know that in high school athletics, where students have equal opportunity, participation is significantly higher among boys than girls. According to The National Federation of State High School Associations, in 2014-2015, 4,519,313 boys participated in high school sports versus 3,287,735 girls (2014-15 High School Participation Survey). Because of Title IX, that ratio is, in effect, governmentally reversed in college.

In soccer, 531 Division I colleges and universities sponsored soccer teams in 2013 (College Soccer & Scholarship Opportunities, 2015). Mainly because of Title IX, the number of men's soccer teams

versus women's was 203 to 328. Moreover, the women's teams averaged 14 full scholarships per team while men's teams averaged 9.9. (Need we wonder why the U.S. Women's Soccer team outperforms the U.S. men in international competition?) Men's baseball and wrestling programs have been especially decimated by Title IX. Yet, every college admissions office knows that one of the most effective ways to increase male enrollment and engagement would be to expand, not reduce, opportunities for male athletes.

One wonders why Title IX is not applied to student support services on the basis of gender. Virtually every college or university provides additional services for women, usually in the form of a Women's Center. Such programs, especially at the community college level, can provide critical assistance to women struggling to improve their lives through education. So what about the men who struggle?

In any given year, the number of programs nationally for college men (not including programs for minority males) can be counted on one hand. Every year I field calls from men---administrators, faculty, students---who wish to start some level of men's programming at their institution. They speak of institutional resistance and a lack of sympathetic funding sources. Some small scale initiatives may wobble into a trial existence, but never get traction. Why are women, with academic performance and college completion rates significantly exceeding those of men, the sole beneficiaries of dollars spent on gender-specific support programs?

5. *Indifference to the literacy gap between boys and girls.*

Boys have consistently lagged behind girls by one-and-half years in reading and writing skills (Gurian, 56). The gap begins in kindergarten (or pre-school) with boys' exhibiting delayed language development compared to girls. While this establishes an enduring performance gap, it may also engender an early dislike of school. Sports provides a corollary as to why. When a boy realizes that he may never be "good" in a certain sport, he will likely search for another sport or activity where he feels more competent. If he views school as a place where, at an early age, he becomes a bench warmer on the "literacy team", he will never become an enthusiastic participant. Later---with 32% of males

dropping out of school (Whitmire, 213)---he may indeed decide to seek another activity. According to James Earl Davis, a professor of educational leadership at Temple University in Philadelphia, boys start school just as eagerly as girls, but by the third or fourth grade "this is squelched". The reason, Davis states, is that boys "continue to get the message they're not doing right." (Ricks).

In the 1990s, there was considerable national focus on the math gap between boys and girls, resulting in federal, state, and district initiatives to alleviate this achievement gap. This soon resulted in measureable progress toward narrowing of the gap, which today is considered insignificant. Seeing the effectiveness of gender-based math initiatives in their country, the British government wondered: would comparable measures help reduce the literacy gap? In the mid-1990s they acted, introducing a number of literacy programs to address the reading/writing gap between boys and girls (Sommers, 152). It included, for instance, the inclusion of more non-fiction reading, preferred by boys. Australia and Canada explored similar initiatives. And in the U.S.? Despite the exemplary success of math initiatives for girls, and positive outcomes from literacy initiatives for boys in other English-speaking nations, neither the U.S. Department of Education nor state education boards have shown a detectable interest in closing the gender literacy gap. Indeed, The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights 2012 report, Gender Equity in Education, omits any reference to a gender literacy gap (Sommers, 34).

6. *Women have a more cooperative approach to learning, men a more independent approach.*

At my college, a female is 33% more likely to use academic support services (e.g. counseling, tutoring, etc.) than a male. They are even more likely to approach a professor or another student for a post-class discussion. Women, it appears, are better at developing the web of supportive relationships necessary to achieve success in college.

A possible cause for this difference is male bravado---that male students, not wishing to display weakness, are less likely to seek academic assistance. As I have found, in my initial meetings with male students, there is validity to this. But this tendency has become overstated as a tenet of the

"man-box theory", which posits that male students inflict harm on themselves and women through rigid self-adherence to historical definitions of masculinity. This theory is making nascent inroads on campuses searching for formal interventions to change "negative" male behaviors. But flagging traditional masculinity as a deeply flawed self-concept, and hoping to re-program it, is not an effective strategy for increasing academic support to males.

For male students, channeling is more effective than changing. We know, for instance, that boys in K-12 are more likely to cooperate in learning environments that emphasize action-oriented group work, corralling their energies to focus on clearly set team-based learning goals, incrementally achieved. This can be more difficult at the college level where learning is less structured and support systems outside the classroom are more feminized. An orientation workshop for new students may begin by asking participants to circle their chairs and individually respond to the question: What is your biggest fear of attending college? Women, who are more likely to connect through self-disclosure, will be more welcoming of the opportunity to share. Situations that require males to disclose personal fears will rarely engender a comfort level. But if male students are asked: "What do you see as your biggest challenge to achieving success at college, and how do you think you can address it?" it reframes the milieu from problem-admitting to problem-solving. Other men in the group will join in to troubleshoot. As trust builds, the more personal may follow. Male students will likely seek help at a higher rate if support systems are not perceived as interactions that require instant self-disclosure.

7. Fewer, non-government financial aid opportunities are available to men.

Of the low income students at my college, a much higher percentage of female students---usually as single-parent mothers---are on public assistance. While their lives are difficult, basic support systems (i.e. food, housing, medical, etc.) often enable enough long term stability to complete educational goals. The low-income men we advise seem more subject to wilder survival swings, often forced to seek temporary jobs---or homeless shelters---once their student loans are expended in a given semester.

For both two-year and four-year colleges, men also have fewer financial aid opportunities to fund higher education. Do an internet search, "College financial aid for women". Do the same search for men. No matter how you phrase the query, there are usually twice as many links for women.

8. Lack of a Major War Requiring a Draft.

It is no surprise that the largest spikes in college enrolment for males occurred after World War II, the Korean Conflict, and the Viet Nam War. The G.I. Bill enabled the millions of young men who survived those wars to attend college for free. Let us hope that this is not the only effective way to increase male college participation.

9. An embedded belief on college campuses that "Men are the problem".

I recently heard from a student at a public university who attributed "anti-maleness" on campuses "to 1st and 2nd Wave Feminists being 'at the reins' in college life.....It has become largely about revenge instead of equality, and that's a shame." Although his angst is directed toward feminists, there is no shortage of male administrators lacking their zeal, at least when it comes to behavioral issues. In any event, "anti-maleness", whether from a compensatory fixation or from fears that young men are behaving badly and need to be re-programmed, has become structural on most campuses.

The Department of Education's 2011 mandate on sexual misconduct, which allows schools to convict accused persons on a mere preponderance of evidence rather than "clear and convincing" evidence, has made campuses a political---and legal---minefield for young men. Another layer, the "Campus Save Act" amendment, was added in 2013. The issues, such as date rape, which these attempt to address are serious and require diligent attention. But the liability of negotiating such dangerous ground is squarely placed on male students. Fair or not, institutionally conveying that message---as part of new student orientations or other mandated programs---can be jarring. As one young man from a California college told me, "I was welcomed to college by being implicated as a potential rapist".

Fraternities are under a microscope, both institutionally and in the national media, for any evidence of young men behaving badly. Although the focus is on binge drinking and sexual predation, it's clear that fraternities, as a perceived vestige of male exclusivity, are an easy political target. Colleges should not turn a blind eye when young men behave badly. But neither should bad behavior in a fraternity house be treated more drastically than the same bad behavior in, say, a dormitory. In any event, college administrators should not lose sight of how a college experience is ultimately measured. There is no data to suggest that college men who join fraternities have a higher failure rate, after graduating, in developing into responsible fathers, loving husbands, successful professionals, or involved citizens.

Virtually all public universities, and many private colleges, require one to two courses in Women's Studies as a graduation requirement. Viewed originally as a new discipline to shine light on neglected history, Women's Studies courses too often serve as mission-driven vehicles to showcase "structural white-hetero-patriarchal" historical abuses. Women's Studies can be an enlightening piece of the academic canon. But subjecting college men to the "sins of the fathers" via academically sanctioned shaming only contributes to an anti-male environment. Moreover, the resentment it engenders negates the intended outcome.

10. Negative media images of men.

Watch 100 TV commercials in which there is interaction between males and females. In commercials where one of the genders is depicted as less intelligent, nearly 100% of the time it will be a male. Funny, yes. But does anyone ever wonder about the cumulative effect on our sons? At what point do they subconsciously start believing it?

There is no study espousing that years of viewing exposure to Homer Simpson's portrayal of fatherhood as an extension of infancy has negatively influenced how young fathers view themselves. But we do know that, historically, if a gender or race is systematically made to feel inept in certain ways, at some point it is collectively internalized.

Perhaps our young men are already doing this .When I walk the hallways of my college, the young men generally look less mature than the women. With their baseball caps and baggy pants, they look like overgrown 12 year old boys, not 18 to 24 year-old men. Historically, the fastest way for a young man to enter the world of men was to look more mature and smarter than his actual years. What makes our young men want to look less mature? Are they starting to reflect media images of themselves?

CONCLUSION

If the educational gender gap is such a problem, why is virtually nothing being done about it? What I have started to hear in recent years is that change must first occur at the K-12 level, and that it won't be government or school driven but via a grassroots effort led by mothers with sons. I hope this is true. On college campuses, real interest in helping men, rather than structurally demonizing them, remains a non-topic. When I write or speak about the gender gap, the predominant pushback (by far) comes in this form: "Men still have all the power (and/or the higher pay) *so how is this a problem?*" This sentiment is so instantly dismissive---and knowingly employed as such---that we cannot as a society even get to a dialogue level, much less a policy one.

But let us, for a moment, agree with the belief that men still have all the power. Isn't that reason enough to pay closer attention to the education of our sons?

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James Shelley completed his undergraduate and graduate work at Miami University and Case Western Reserve University respectively. As the Director of the Men's Resource Center at Lakeland Community College, in Kirtland, Ohio, he designs and delivers individual and programmatic support to male students, a gender minority on campus. The Center, which he started in 1996, was one of the first programs on an American campus dedicated to supporting college men. Unfortunately, it was not one of the first of many to follow. The Center, by its continued rarity, has made him something of an earpiece nationally for those interested in expressing their views on issues affecting male students.

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