

## **No Map to Manhood**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the basis of the gender gap in postsecondary enrollment through qualitative interviews with 99 high school seniors who are making decisions about college. While individual differences occurred, female high school seniors were far more apt to have well-developed plans to attend college based on their views that education is a vital educational investment, that the occupations they seek require a college education, and that they want to make a difference to society. Male high school students evidenced two different mindsets. Those from families whose parents had graduated from college saw higher education just as the expected path. Those from working class families had little knowledge of the labor market, the likelihood of obtaining “dream jobs,” and the income they would need to live comfortable adult lives. Far more young men disliked schooling. Both sexes have developed a stereotype of males as “lazy,” a label which covers a host of problems reducing college enrollment.

## **No Map to Manhood:**

### **Male and Female Mindsets Behind the College Gender Gap**

A college education not only confers benefits to the individual but also to American society. College-educated men earn more income, are less apt to be unemployed during times of recession, and pay more taxes (Mortenson, 2006). Men with only a high school education have shown a 26 percent decline in real income since 1973, and men without a high school diploma have shown a 38 percent decline. Men with higher levels of education also vote more in state and national elections, are more likely to marry, and less likely to become involved with the criminal justice system (Mortenson, 2006, Sum, Fogg, & Harrington, 2003). Higher educational attainment increases the skilled labor force, labor productivity and economic growth (Sum et al., 2003). A higher education even affects levels of happiness. Since the 1970s, happiness has risen among college graduates but declined among people with only a high school education or less (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008).

Young women are increasingly seeking out the postsecondary education required to seize the opportunities presented by an increasingly information-based, globalized economy. High-paying employment in many occupations traditionally held by men and not requiring a postsecondary education have sharply declined (Mortenson, 2006). Between 1948 and 2005, employees in agriculture shrank from 14.5 percent of all jobs to 1.6

percent while manufacturing dropped from 27.2 percent to 10.5 percent. Professional and related occupations, requiring a postsecondary education, are one of the two occupational groups expected to add the most new jobs from 2006 to 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008-09). Men, as well as women, need to secure the higher education necessary to succeed in this changing economy.

### **The Gender Gap in Postsecondary Enrollment and Attainment**

Women have become the majority of college undergraduates and of students who earn postsecondary degrees. Their plans for postsecondary education are evident in high school. In a nationally representative sample of high school sophomores, 84 percent of young women reported that they planned to attain a college degree or above compared to just 75 percent of males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Young women also reported more pressure from the significant figures in their lives to go to college. Far more young women say that their fathers, mothers, school counselors, and teachers tell them that college is the most important thing for them to do immediately after high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Young women are indeed more apt to enter college right after high school (King, 2006), and such students have higher graduation rates than students who delay postsecondary enrollment (Horn, Cataldi & Sikora, 2005). Women are also more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within five years of entering college (Freeman, 2004).

Not only has a substantial gender gap developed in the attainment of postsecondary degrees but the problem is dramatic among the most

disadvantaged groups, Black and Hispanic men (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Ginder, & Miller, 2007). Among Whites in 2006, women obtained 61 percent of associate degrees; among Blacks, women obtained 69 percent of these degrees; among Hispanics, women obtained 62 percent of these degrees. Bachelor's degree attainment also shows a substantial gender gap. Among Whites, women obtained 57 percent of bachelor's degrees; among Blacks, women obtained 66 percent of these degrees; among Hispanics, women obtained 61 percent of these degrees. Similarly, White women obtained 62 percent of master's degrees; among Blacks, women obtained 72 percent of these degrees; among Hispanics, women obtained 65 percent of these degrees.

Doctoral degrees also show a growing gender gap (Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2004). Among Whites, women obtained 54 percent of doctoral degrees; among Blacks, women obtained 64 percent; among Hispanics, women obtained 56 percent. The gender gap in attaining higher degrees in mathematics and the physical sciences, however, remains. Women in 2006, for example, obtained only 21 percent of doctoral degrees in computer sciences and 29 percent of degrees in both mathematics and the physical sciences (Burelli, 2008).

For first-professional degrees, White women obtained 53 percent; Black women obtained 64 percent; and only Hispanic women obtained slightly fewer than Hispanic men, 48 percent. In the prestigious, high-income fields of law and medicine, women have almost reached parity with men in both initial enrollments and graduates (American Bar Association, 2008; Association of American Medical Colleges, 2008).

To summarize the college gender gap, with which this paper is principally concerned:

- \* Among Whites, women obtained 57 percent of bachelor's degrees
- Among Blacks, women obtained 66 percent of bachelor's degrees
- Among Hispanics, women obtained 61 percent of bachelor's degrees.

The increasing postsecondary achievement of women is cause for celebration. At the same time, men and especially minority men are less likely to earn the degrees which will enable them to earn a good living, stay employed, marry, and be attractive to the increasing numbers of highly educated women.

### **Explanations for the Postsecondary Gender Gap**

Numerous explanations have been proposed to explain the gender gap. Some emphasize the high dropout rate of young men from high school, especially the very high dropout rates of Black and Hispanic young men. The calculation of high school dropout rates is highly controversial (Chaplin & Klasik, 2006; Greene & Winters, 2006; Orfield, 2004). Whatever the method of analysis, the fundamental story is the same: Far more males drop out. Among all students, 75% of females compared to 68% of males graduate from high school (Education Week, 2008). Just 48% of Black males and 52% of Hispanic males are high school graduates—a social and

economic catastrophe. A dramatic proportion of young Black men ages 16 to 24 (17 percent) are “idle,” neither in school nor employed (Edelman, Holzer & Offner, 2006).

Other explanations for the gender gap emphasize the influence of the Women’s Movement in raising women’s expectations for achievement and economic independence (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). The ages of marriage and having children are rising, young women increasingly aspire to prestigious careers, and see themselves as working outside the home for much of their lives. The rise in divorce rates since the 1960s has also made young women aware that they must be prepared to support themselves and their children.

Some researchers see the primary explanation of the college gender gap in the greater economic returns of a college education for women compared to men. The wage premium of a college education is higher for women, especially minority women, which encourages women to obtain a postsecondary education degree rather than take jobs in clerical, sales, or other poorly paid fields which do not require a college degree (Dougherty, 2005; Perna, 2005).

Other explanations of the college gender gap emphasize girls’ better preparation for college demands. Young women have higher achievement in the foundational skills of reading and writing, necessary to college success. At the 12th grade level, 31 percent of young women achieve at the proficient or advanced levels in writing, compared to just 16 percent of young men,

according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.<sup>1</sup> In reading, 41 percent of young women are achieving at the proficient or advanced levels, compared to 29 percent of male students. Girls also are more apt to have important “soft” or non-cognitive skills, for example, having the self-discipline to complete assignments and spending longer hours doing homework (Duckworth & Seligman, 2008; Jacob, 2002; Pryor, Hutardo, Sharkness & Korn, 2008). Perhaps young women are more apt to see college as an arena in which they will do well.

To understand the bases of the college gender gap, a significant and neglected issue is the thinking of students themselves, especially high school seniors who are in the immediate process of making decisions about whether or not to attend college. Are young men and young women aware of the changing opportunities of the labor market? Do young women enjoy the experience of schooling, for example, while young men want to avoid further schooling, an experience which they find distasteful? Understanding the mindsets of young men is important to developing approaches to increasing college attendance, which take into account their actual thinking, and thus what may motivate them.

## **Methods**

Alaska is a fruitful locale for examining the phenomenon of the college gender gap because the state has the third highest college gender gap in the nation, with 149 women enrolled in degree-granting institutions for

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress test scores, using the Data Explorer analytic tool.

every 100 men (Sum et al., 2003). This study began with exploratory research with approximately 490 college freshmen at the University of Alaska, the main statewide institution of higher education. Students in a required social science course from the fall of 2003 through the fall of 2008 were asked to interview four key informants, two males and two females, about their college decisions and the influences on their plans. Students typically interviewed their close relatives and friends, brothers and sisters, and boy friends and girl friends. Many students wrote papers on the college gender gap that showed considerable insight, based on family histories, parental attitudes, and insider knowledge that an outside researcher would find it hard to obtain. These exploratory interviews were used as a basis for questions in the later systematic study.

*Sample:* High school seniors were stratified by grade point average (“A,” “B,” and “C” or below) and randomly sampled from two representative urban high schools in Alaska’s two largest cities, Anchorage and Fairbanks. They were interviewed in the spring, just before high school graduation, when they were thinking about what to do next. The final sample consisted of 99 high school students, of which 53% were female. The students were diverse with 57% White students, 15% Asian students, 12% African-American, 6% Alaska Native, 5% Latino, and 5% from other cultural backgrounds.

*Measure:* The semi-structured interview began with an open-ended question, “What are you thinking about doing after you graduate from high school?” The interview then addressed five topics: 1) students’ specific plans and the ideas informing their choices, 2) their experiences in high



school, 3) their desired occupations, 4) influences on their decisions, and 5) whether they perceived a gender gap in school success, and, if so, their own thoughts on the causes of this gap. Each of these topics began with an open-ended question to reveal students' unprompted thinking and the open-ended questions were followed by closed questions so that systematic data was obtained. After each section of the interview, the interviewer repeated what the student had said, using the phrase, "So what I understand you are saying is..." The boys especially listened to this summary with great attentiveness and some relief, since it often revealed more systematic thinking than they realized.

One-tailed chi square tests were used to examine gender differences, since our expectation from previous research was that females were more apt to go to college and to have reasons for this choice. We emphasize that statistical significance should be interpreted cautiously because these questions come from the same interviews and thus do not meet the formal assumption of statistical independence.

*Focus Group and Key Informant Interviews:* In addition to these interviews, we also interviewed high school counselors and school administrators about students' postsecondary decision making. We conducted as well single-gender focus groups of nine students each on their decisions after high school and the bases of their ideas. The focus groups revealed dramatic differences in peer group pressures and norms. In the male group, the students joked around and pointed to examples of men they knew who had earned a lot of money without a college education. In the female focus group, all the young women detailed their college plans with great

seriousness except for one young woman who was going to live with her aunt in Chicago after high school. She left abruptly in the middle of the focus group session, even though she had said she was available for the session and had been paid for her time. She appeared to be nervous and embarrassed that she was not going to college as were the other female students, and, unlike her peers, was drifting.

Institutional Review Board permission to conduct the research was secured from the University of Alaska and consent obtained from the two school districts, the principals of the schools, parents, and the high school seniors themselves. Students were paid \$10 for their participation.

*Limitations:* One obvious limitation, of course, is that all students came from urban Alaska and this study needs to be replicated in more diverse locations. Another limitation of this study, inevitable in current research which requires elaborate consent processes, is that the sample is skewed toward students from more stable families. These families were more apt to return their consent forms.

Another bias, but an informative and revealing one, is the lower number of male students who agreed to participate and who thus had to be replaced. To our surprise, a number of male students would not consent to an interview on what they were doing after high school, even though they were released from classes and got a ten-dollar bill on the spot. Talking about their futures was evidently something that they did not want to do. Perhaps they did not wish to reveal to themselves, as well as to the interviewer, how confused and insecure they were. This is alarming—such young men would be unlikely

to request help from a guidance counselor or otherwise express their anxieties about their futures. The lack of reasonable plans among senior boys at the end of the school year indicates a serious failing on the part of the school and its guidance counselors.

## **Findings**

We begin with a typical interview of a female high school student, who told the interviewer a narrative which became all too familiar: “The Star Sister and Her Brother the Slacker.”

Annie’s passion was horses—she owned two and a family of dogs as well. She came from a working class family, living in a trailer with her parents and brother. She had paid for her two horses herself and supported them by working at a veterinary clinic after school and on weekends. She planned to own a Kentucky horse farm one day. A fantasy? Annie had already taken courses at the university, even though she was still in high school and planned to graduate with a business degree, which would give her the skills to run her own business. She had made it a point to learn at the veterinary clinic how to give her horses their injections so she could keep her future veterinary bills down. Annie had her life planned out until the day she died, her unfocused boy friend told her with a mixture of awe and disgust. She had a clear life script: First came college and then came an interesting, fulfilling career. Sometime in the distant future she expected to marry and have a family. Of course, Annie was going to college. She was already taking college courses on the university campus and doing well. She radiated confidence and excitement.

Annie felt a heavy responsibility to fulfill her parents' hopes for their children and to make up for what she interpreted as her brother's laziness. Her brother John would not do his homework, was doing badly in school, and spent every free minute playing videogames. When she pestered him to work harder in school, he told her to "Shut up and fuck off!"

Like Annie, the young women we interviewed were far more likely than the young men to view college as crucial to their future success, with 72% of the young women agreeing that college was a "vital educational investment" compared to just 49% of the young men ( $\chi^2 = 4.93, p = .026$ ). Female students (75%) were significantly more likely to desire jobs requiring a college degree than male students (41%), for example, wanting to be a researcher, a doctor, or a diplomat ( $\chi^2 = 9.47, p = .009$ ). When asked why they sought a college degree, the young women were not motivated primarily by the additional income or their knowledge of the demands of the labor market. When asked why they chose their desired occupation, only 29% of the young women, compared to 50% of the young men mentioned a high income as the reason for their choice. Altruistic values strongly influenced the future aspirations of the young women and they saw a college education as critical in their ability to make a difference. These values suffused the young women's interviews. When asked why they had chosen a particular occupation, for example, 46% of the young women gave as a reason the desire "to help people" or "to make the world a better place," while only 9% of young men mentioned such motives ( $\chi^2 = 10.83, p = .001$ ). Even when a young woman's future plans were nebulous, she often said that she wanted to make a difference. As one young woman put it, "I really

don't know what I want to do, but I want to do some sort of service to society.”

The female high school students were choosing college because: 1) they wanted interesting and meaningful, not necessarily high-paying jobs, 2) they wanted jobs that would allow them to help society, 3) they were aware of how much everyone—especially their parents but also their teachers and the professional women they met—expected of them, 4) they were aware of how much opportunity they themselves enjoyed compared to previous generations of women and felt an obligation to take advantage of these new opportunities, and 5) they wanted to be independent and not have to rely on a man. “Girls feel more obliged to take advantage of the opportunities because of the women’s rights movement, because our mothers didn’t have these opportunities,” one young woman explained. Another high school girl elaborated, “Back in the days when women didn’t have to go to college, they could just get married and start a family. Women now want an education. They don’t want to have to rely on a guy to support them.”

These young women had, for the most part, clear plans for the future, well scripted. When asked, “What are you thinking about doing after high school?” they had a road map. At the end of their senior year, far more young women (64%) than young men (40%) had already applied to college and more were planning to apply while fewer stated that they planned no college or future education ( $\chi^2 = 17.78, p = .007$ ).

While this mindset emerged among young women of different socioeconomic backgrounds, two different mindsets emerged among the

young men. The first framework for thinking was typical of young men with college-educated parents and the second framework was typical of young men from working-class families. The young men from college-educated families were rarely excited about pursuing a college education. The common refrain was that college was what their parents expected of them. “I always felt like I was supposed to go to college,” one young man put it.

Young men from working-class families, on the other hand, did not for the most part view college as necessary to their future success or social standing. Only 29% of males from working class families saw college as a vital educational investment, compared to 70% of their female counterparts ( $\chi^2 = 5.67, p = .01$ ).

Could young men view the opportunities presented by the skilled trades as more attractive than a college-education? While this hypothesis seems reasonable and many students themselves saw the reason for the college gender gap as the availability of high paid, high-skilled jobs in traditionally male occupations that did not require college, the data did not bear it out. Among the young men, just 13% had plans to pursue technical training after graduation. High school counselors said that many high school boys were not interested in the skilled trades and would not fill out applications even if the counselors encouraged them and handed them the application forms. Many of the young men expressed interest in implausible “dream jobs,” such as designing videogames, owning a recording studio, directing movies, or becoming music stars. They had virtually no idea of how to get into these occupations.

Many male seniors from working-class backgrounds were drifting, saying they would “take some time off” or postpone planning in hopes that some lucrative opportunity would eventually present itself and everything would work itself out. The absence of rational economic decision-making surfaced in many young men’s ignorance of the job market and the amount of money they would require to live a comfortable life. As one young man noted, “Some of my friends were tripping out because they raised up the minimum wage to \$7.15 an hour and they’re saying that’s a lot of money, and it’s really not, but they were like ‘forget this’ (getting a college education). I’m going to go to work for \$7.15 an hour.” “High school dropouts make \$100,000 a year in the videogame industry,” another young man enthused. Virtually every working class young man could name a person who had made big bucks without a college degree.

Among working class young men, parents were less apt to “push college” as the path to a desirable future. While 76% of female students with working class parents mentioned family encouragement to go to college, the same was true for only 41% of young men from similar families ( $\chi^2 = 6.506$ ,  $p = .039$ ). Indeed, 18% of the young men from working class families reported *negative* family pressure. One such student said that his brothers and father told him that he could make lots of money in trade jobs and that he didn’t want an office job because his brothers would think it was a “fruity job for a guy.”

In the absence of pressure from family and friends to pursue postsecondary education, young men from working class families talked about “going with the flow.” We rather admired one boy who said that upon

graduation he and a like-minded friend planned to take some “souped-up trucks and jet-skis and travel down Highway 101.” When they ran out of money, they would just “find jobs and take it from there. Might as well do it while we’re young and still have money.” When asked how his parents felt about his plan, he said they told him, “If you put yourself in a hole, that’s your deal.” But few young men planned such adventures. Maybe they would continue in their after-school jobs and work more hours, maybe they would go to college after awhile. Many didn’t have much of an idea of what they were going to do after high school graduation.

Another striking difference in our interviews concerned the dramatic gender gap in students’ enjoyment of the experience of schooling. When asked if they liked going to school, 54% of the young women expressed strong enjoyment compared to just 21% of the young men, while 26% of the young men expressed strong dislike of school compared to only 8% of the young women ( $\chi^2 = 11.895, p = .003$ ). One young woman put it plainly, “I love school!” When asked for details, she lavished praise on passionate teachers who pushed her “past her comfort level” and encouraged her to “achieve her dreams.” She was looking forward to heading to college in the fall, in part because “college shows you’re able to learn.” Young men made such comments as, “I’m pretty much going to high school just so I can graduate” or “School is a chore. You gotta do stuff you don’t like doing.” Several young men complained that vocational classes were no longer available, and classes like shop used to provide a bright spot in their boring school day. One young man complained about the irrelevance of school, “You have to read literature. Why read stuff that isn’t even true?”



An important reason for these gender differences in liking school may well be gender differences in learning styles, a theory which has already received a great deal of attention (Gurian, 2005; Gurian, Stevens, & King, 2008a; 2008b ; Sax, 2005 ; Tyre, 2008 ). The conference held by the National Association of Single Sex Public Schooling, for example, featured two days of presentations, many of which consisted of teachers describing learning styles which worked better for girls versus boys). According to this view, the structure of schooling is not compatible with the learning styles of many boys. Boys do far better in classrooms which allow activity, encourage competition, and structure the day in short chunks. Boys do better when teachers speak at high volume, when the temperature is cooler, and when many kinesthetic learning opportunities occur. While these suggestions have not been rigorously tested, the “wisdom of practice” of many teachers is consistent with this view.

Most of the students interviewed (58%) had noticed the gender gap in school success and college attendance and had folk theories about the causes. Their explanations centered on three themes:

*Theme 1: Young men are lazy.*

“Guys have the brains but they don’t want to put forth the effort.” (Female senior)

“Guys are guys...It’s the slacker generation. Girls have a certain drive that we don’t have.” (Male senior)

*Theme 2: Young men don't plan ahead.*

“Ladies know what they want. They set goals and they go for it. Girls plan weeks in advance, guys wake up and see what happens.” (Male senior)

“Girls set a plan and do it, where I go with the flow; whatever happens, happens and I just go with it.” (Male senior)

*Theme 3: Young men are easily distracted and prone to peer pressure.*

“Guys have a different kind of peer pressure. Cars and drinking are cooler than school. Guys get sidetracked a lot easier.” (Male senior)

“Guys have more interests outside of school, like video games or hanging out...Like my brother, he really got sucked into games on the Internet and that takes up a big part of his life.” (Female senior)

“Laziness” was the theme that both boys and girls mentioned most often in explaining the gender gap. The label covered up other problems. When we asked one young man, for example, why he didn't fill out scholarship forms when he needed the money, he said that he was “just too lazy.” The interviewer pointed out that he was doing backbreaking work at a lumberyard. Why did he say he was lazy? “Lazy” turned out to be the word

he used to hide a host of problems: insecurity about his ability to make it in college, problems in understanding applications and scholarship forms, difficulty in writing required essays, reluctance to ask for help, and the lack of goals worth pursuing with energy. None of the young women mentioned that they were lazy, had troubles planning and working in school, felt negative pressures about studying hard, or refusing social engagements because they wanted to study.

## **Conclusion**

At this point, few college officials are troubled about the gender gap at their institutions. When the gap reaches 60-40 in favor of women, some say, they will begin to consider it a problem (Vickers, 2006). A few institutions like Kenyon College, a private institution, are establishing quiet affirmative action programs, which allow men with lower grades and other qualifications to enter. Other institutions are making feeble attempts to attract males. Brandeis University, for example, offered free baseball caps to the first 500 male undergraduate applicants. Boston University's president, John Silber, asked that the university's publicity materials be gender-neutral and that a ROTC photograph showing a woman should also include a male. It is hard to imagine free baseball caps or a change in a ROTC photograph having any effect on male enrollment. Moreover, such strategies, even if successful, do not increase the number of young men who go to college but merely redistribute them.

This research suggests strategies to increase the numbers of young men who go to college which take into account their mindsets. First, young

men need information on the changing job market. Many young men have unrealistic ideas about occupations in high demand and little understanding of their chances for actually getting “dream jobs” in computers or the music industry. Many young men have little idea of how much money they will need to live a comfortable adult life and how vulnerable the lack of a college education makes them in times of economic setbacks. Activities to develop their ideas about the labor market could be introduced into many courses, such as English courses which require a research paper.

Second, young men need to see higher education as a satisfying arena for achievement rather than merely an extension of high school. Many young men would be interested in programs better linked to typical male interests and images of masculinity, such as emergency medical services, justice and law enforcement, and computer technology. Dual enrollment programs, which combine high school with courses on college campuses in such high-interest programs would provide a structured pathway to college and would circumvent the tendency of many young men to drift after high school.

Third, schools need to take seriously the emerging “wisdom of practice” experience of teachers who have adapted their classrooms to the learning styles of boys. Some teachers have done so in the context of single sex schools or single sex classrooms, where such adjustments are easier to make. To make such changes in a co-ed classroom is more difficult but certainly possible. Allowing boys more movement and physical activity, for example, could be done without much difficulty. More movement would benefit many girls as well, and any child who needs more activity (whether a

girl or a boy) would have the opportunity. While such adaptations are not research-tested, the growing consensus that movement, for example, benefits boys makes sense and is consistent with the experience of many teachers.

The Women's Movement has done an admirable service for young women, increasing their achievement in areas where they were behind, such as mathematics and science, alerting teachers to their needs, and encouraging them to go to college and pursue a range of careers. The Women's Movement, above all, has stimulated the imaginations of girls and young women, who see new possibilities for success and for making a difference. We need now to turn our attention to the many young men who are falling behind and developing a self-defeating image of themselves as "lazy slackers."

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