

Stakeholder Summary

Gender Gap in University Participation Traces Back to Early High School Decisions

Recent studies show that women account for more than 60% of Canadian university graduates. A new study by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) finds that the university gender gap can be explained by choices and academic performance in high school, particularly in grade 9.

The study examined approximately 130,000 Ontario high school students and found that more females selecting and succeeding in academic-track math and language courses in grade 9 accounted for 70% of the gender gap in registration for university. Another 20-25% is explained by differences in course selection and grades at the end of high school.

Project Description

Understanding the Gender Gap in Postsecondary Education Participation: The Importance of High School Choices and Outcomes is based on a longitudinal data set of students enrolled in grade 9 in the 2005-2006 academic year at publicly funded Ontario high schools. The data include information on courses, grades, university and college applications, basic demographics and standardized test results from grades 6 and 9. Postsecondary application and registration information was provided by the Ontario Universities' Application Centre and the Ontario College Application Service, and data from the 2006 Census were used for additional regional demographic information.

Findings

Among students who start high school performing well in the standard set of grade 9 courses, 69% of females registered for postsecondary education versus just 59% of males. This gap is only evident for university registrations, not for colleges.

In the first two years of high school, students can either take academic or applied courses in most subjects, including mathematics and languages. The academic track leads to courses that prepare students for university and the applied track is designed for students who plan to attend a two- or three-year college program or plan to enter the workforce immediately after high school. Simply knowing whether a student had strong grades (a score of 70 or higher) in academic track courses in the first year of high school is highly predictive of course selection and grades at the end of high school as well as university entry. Females who start off with high achievement in grade 9 are more likely to maintain this performance into their later years of high school and ensure a high likelihood of acceptance to university. Additionally, females who struggle initially are better able to get back on track compared to males.

The study also examines some of the pre-high school factors that may impact academic or applied course selection in grade 9 and found that girls outperforming boys in grade 6 reading scores is partially

responsible. Males are also twice as likely as females to be classified as special needs students by the time they enter high school, suggesting there are important gender differences in the incidence of learning disabilities and behavioural and communicative disorders. Combined, these factors can explain up to one-third of the difference in grade 9 course selection and outcomes between males and females.

*Authors of *Understanding the Gender Gap in Postsecondary Education Participation: The Importance of High School Choices and Outcomes* are David Card, University of California, Berkeley and A. Abigail Payne, McMaster University.*