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INTRODUCTION

On July 9, 2006, the front page of the *New York Times* read, “At Colleges, Women are Leaving Men in the Dust.” The story described growing gender gaps in college enrollment and academic performance and raised questions about what, if anything, should be done about “the new gender divide.” Reaction to this article was widespread, with some applauding women’s academic successes, and others lamenting the seemingly dismal state of affairs for today’s young men.

We have indeed reached a critical juncture in the history of women and men in higher education. Today—decades after the women’s movement started what became monumental gains for female students in terms of access, equity, and opportunity—the popular notion is that gender equity has been achieved. Some higher education statistics do paint a rosy picture for women, who now make up the majority of undergraduates (up to 58 percent nationally), earn better college grades than men do, and are more likely than men to complete college. In recent years, these gender gaps have raised concerns that we have reached a crisis point for men (Hoff Sommers, 2000; Mortenson, 2003).

Although it is easy to view these trends as a clear indication of women’s progress—and of the challenges now facing men—interpretations of those trends depend on how deeply we look at them. According to reports by the American Council on Education and the Education Sector, the growing gender gap in college enrollments is attributable primarily to increases in college attendance among women from groups historically underrepresented in higher education—namely, African Americans,

Latinas, older students, and those of lower socioeconomic status (King, 2006; Mead, 2006). This fact is important because it demonstrates that the sociodemographic composition of female students is becoming increasingly different from that of male students. That is, male and female college students differ from each other not only based on their gender; they are becoming more distinct in terms of their demographic makeup.

Notable educational gains made by women also must be understood in the context of significant gender gaps that favor men. For example, women continue to score lower than men on standardized tests used for college admissions and remain underrepresented in the majority of scientific and technical fields, especially at the master's and doctoral levels. Female college students also report higher levels of stress and lower levels of self-confidence than their male counterparts. This is not to suggest that college is *responsible* for such gender differences. In fact, sex differentials stem primarily from the precollege years, when women and men develop different values, confidences, aspirations, and patterns of behavior (Sax & Harper, 2007). Yet, for the most part, these gender differences persist—and may even grow larger—during college. In fact, a major nationwide study of students shows that nearly every gender difference observed at college entry widens over time:

Even though men and women are presumably exposed to a common liberal arts curriculum and to other common environmental experiences during the college years, it would seem that their educational programs preserve and strengthen, rather than reduce or weaken, stereotypic differences between men and women in behavior, personality, aspirations, and achievement. (Astin, 1993c, p. 406)

However, less is known about *how* college contributes to these differences. Do gender gaps at the end of college result from differential reactions to academic and social experiences? Do women's and men's exposure to faculty, peers, the curriculum, or

extracurricular activities affect them in different ways? For the most part, the college curriculum and cocurriculum do not consider these potential gender differences in the impact of college. Though some campus practitioners may anticipate differential needs from and developmental patterns among their male and female students, these considerations tend to be shaped by personal experiences, anecdotes, and gut instinct—not by empirically driven research.

Theoretical perspectives certainly support the notion that college women’s development should be considered as potentially distinct from men’s. Traditional theories of cognitive, moral, and identity development contributed by Perry (1970), Kohlberg (1975), and Erikson (1968) have long been criticized for their lack of attention to developmental differences based on gender. Critiques of traditional male-based theories have given rise to feminist theoretical approaches that view women’s development as uniquely dependent on their relations with individuals and on fostering a “care orientation” (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987). Based on these perspectives, one might expect women’s development in college to be more strongly tied to their interactions with others—such as peers, faculty, and family—or to their involvement in the community than is the case for men. Conversely, it may be that relationships and a sense of connectedness are important for *both* women and men, but that their influence depends on the developmental outcome in question. The vast body of empirical research on college student development scarcely addresses such potential gender differences. In fact, our understanding of how college affects students has generally derived from studies of students in the aggregate.

The seminal works of Feldman and Newcomb (1969), Trent and Medsker (1968), Astin (1977, 1993c), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), and countless others have shaped this field’s conception of how college environments and experiences contribute to various dimensions of cognitive and affective development. What

is clear from this ever-expanding scholarship base is that students stand to benefit from forging meaningful connections on campus, whether with people, places, or programs. This sense of connection is characterized in a number of ways, and among the most popular are “involvement” (Astin, 1999), “engagement” (Kuh, 2001), and “integration” (Tinto, 1987; Weidman, 1989). And yet little is known about the extent to which such important forces in college might operate *differently* for women and men. Indeed, as Pascarella (1984) noted more than two decades ago, “It is unlikely that all students will benefit equally from the same institution, program, or instructional emphasis” (p. 47). Thus, by considering “college impact” generically—without addressing how women and men may differ in their reactions to college—we run the risk of misapplying knowledge about how college affects students.

Responding to this gap in the research, some higher education scholars have begun to address what are known as “conditional” effects, or the ways in which aspects of college—such as classroom climate, peer culture, or extracurricular activities—differentially affect groups of students as defined by race, gender, or other characteristics. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) emphasize the importance of studying the conditional effects of college and present a thorough review of what we know regarding college impact for different types of students. They note that although the study of conditional effects has grown, particularly over the past decade, conclusions about conditional effects are typically based on single studies that are in need of replication. This gap in the knowledge base provides higher education researchers with an important research agenda, but unfortunately, it leaves today’s campus practitioners without information to guide them in developing programs and services that maximize the benefits of college for all students. Given the role that college impact research has had in transforming and improving the practice of student affairs, it is now incumbent on researchers to extend our understanding of college impact by uncovering *which* types of students benefit from *which* college experiences.

Intention of This Book

This book seeks to advance the study of college impact by addressing whether and how the impact of college differs for women and men. It draws from the nation's largest and longest-running study of American higher education to address the following fundamental questions:

- In what ways do women and men differ when they enter college? How has the gender gap shifted over the past four decades?
- To what extent do gender differences expand or contract over four years of college?
- Do the experiences in college that influence student development differ between the sexes? Are some college environments and experiences important for both genders but perhaps more salient for women or men? If so, is there a discernable pattern across the results that can inform long-standing theories of college student development?

In answering these questions, this book provides insights into how we can improve the college-going experience for both genders. It helps us understand that men and women experience college differently, even when they are enrolled in the same classes, live in the same residence halls, and join the same clubs. It reveals that certain aspects of college—such as living away from home, interacting with faculty, and learning about diversity—contribute in unique ways to women's and men's development.

The book also points the way toward new research questions that can further illuminate the complex role of gender in college. We find, for example, that interacting with professors influences stress and self-image among women, while it contributes to political and social activism among men. We also learn that sports and exercise promote academic achievement among

women but have the opposite effect among men. These and other intriguing findings suggest important avenues for future research. They also underscore the practical value of thinking about the *differential* effects of college for different types of students, whether defined by gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic that may influence how a student experiences college.

And though this book is not the first to address gender differences in the college-going experience, it is perhaps the first to examine this issue in such a systematic and comprehensive fashion. It is intended to determine whether there exist fundamental differences in the impact of college on women and men. And while it does reveal more differences than similarities, such “conditional” effects of college do not arrange themselves as coherently and thematically as one might hope—or as some theoretical perspectives might suggest. Instead, understanding the “gendered” effects of college is uncharted, complex terrain; it does not lend itself to one big, unifying message. This book moves the agenda forward by revealing literally hundreds of ways in which college affects women and men in unique ways, with each difference suggesting potential implications for practice and avenues for further research.

Who Should Read This Book?

The topic of the “gender gap” in higher education garners attention in numerous circles, including researchers, practitioners, faculty, students, policy makers, and the media. Individuals within any one of these groups may be interested in the role of gender in college because it informs their professional work or perhaps because it shapes their thinking about their own college experience. Indeed, all readers are encouraged to recall their own college experiences when reading this book as a way of gaining insights into their own choices and dispositions.

Though this book provides valuable information to a wide range of individuals, it is geared primarily toward two major audiences. The first is practitioners working in any capacity in a college setting. If you are a professional affiliated with student affairs, academic affairs, or other campus units, your ability to most effectively serve students benefits from knowing the ways in which college can yield differential effects on different types of students—in this case, women and men. While reading this book, you should consider how the findings can help you improve your practice. Do the results suggest ways in which one gender or the other is potentially benefiting—or being shortchanged—by programs and services under your purview? How can your professional work benefit from an awareness of the experiences that women and men have in services outside your domain? How might you facilitate the creation of programming and services that maximize the potential of both genders? Though the book offers numerous implications for practice, you, through your own experiences, will have a better idea of the real-life implications of the results presented here.

This book's other major audience includes researchers, graduate students, and other scholars interested in the interplay between gender and higher education. Those who are familiar with the literature on the impact of college may appreciate the ways in which this book confirms much of what we know of as "general" effects of college as well as the ways it adds much-needed new knowledge on gender-based "conditional" effects of college. Researchers will find a large number of fertile avenues for future research. Indeed, scholars may wish to replicate the findings generated in this book and/or to address the dozens of new research questions that emerge. As readers will see, these new research questions are not inconsequential. They force us to reconsider all our assumptions about how college affects students, at least if we aim to understand how college affects some students *differently* than others.

Gearing this book to these two major audiences also presents an opportunity to enhance the connection between scholars and practitioners. Ideally, researchers aiming to advance knowledge about gender differences in the impact of college will also aim to convey it in a way that provides relevant information to those who can use it. And while practitioners can apply these findings to their practice, they also have an opportunity to further shape the research agenda on gender in higher education by raising awareness of persistent and emerging gender differences in their interactions with students. Ultimately, greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners will enhance their mutual goal of improving the student experience for both genders.

Studying Gender Difference: An Ethical Dilemma

Readers of this book may also wish to reflect on an important ethical question: What are the consequences of studying gender difference? The answer to this question is a matter of scholarly debate. At first glance, identifying differences between college women and men would seem to be a useful mechanism toward improving the college experience for *both* genders. Surely, if we understand how women and men are unique in their backgrounds, aspirations, preparation, interests, expectations, and goals, it seems logical to conclude that we could use such information to better serve women and men as they prepare for, enroll in, and graduate from college.

However, there is a legitimate argument that the study of gender difference primarily reinforces gender differences. In fact, despite decades of research documenting so-called “statistically significant” differences between males and females, the actual size of the gender gap tends to be quite small (Hyde, 2005). In fact, differences *among* men or women tend to be much larger than differences *between* the sexes (Tavris, 1992). Focusing our attention on gender gaps—no matter how small—may lead us to

overstate sex differences, thereby fueling public misconceptions about differences between males and females. An overgeneralized perception of sex differentials can have nontrivial consequences for students, as their academic, occupational, and personal decisions are shaped by years of socialization by parents, teachers, the media, and other sources of influence.

In my view, the benefits of uncovering gender differences far outweigh the potential drawbacks, especially since the alternative is to ignore gender differences altogether. What is important, however, is to engage in thoughtful reflection on the magnitude and meaning of the differences that do exist. Indeed, this book highlights scores of “significant” differences between the sexes, both in students’ characteristics and experiences as they enter college and in how they change during college. Further, the very large samples make it fairly easy for sex differentials to be deemed significant from a statistical standpoint. For that reason, this study has adopted stringent standards for determining statistical significance and readily acknowledges that the differences observed between women and men may be only the tip of the iceberg. In fact, while this study advances our understanding of conditional effects of college, one could argue that assessing just one condition (i.e., gender) minimally detects conditional effects.

Thus, this book is a first step in understanding the extent to which college yields *nonuniform* effects on women and men and opens up the door for future research to examine conditional effects *within* gender. In other words, if a college experience relates to a particular outcome for women but not men, we must then ask: Does the experience predict this outcome equally for all women or just certain types of women? Which women are more strongly affected and why? How do race, ethnicity, class, and other factors further shape women’s college-going experiences? This sort of questioning and probing of conditional college effects ought to become second nature not only to those of us engaged in research on college impact but also to campus

practitioners and decision makers whose everyday efforts should be guided by maximum enlightenment about the ways in which college affects different types of students in different ways.

Who Is Included in the Study?

This book is based on the survey responses of undergraduate women and men attending colleges nationwide over the past four decades. These students participated in surveys conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles. The CIRP is a nationwide program of research designed to study the characteristics and experiences of college students and the ways in which college contributes to students' personal and academic development.

The CIRP is probably best known for its annual Freshman Survey. Initiated in 1966 by Alexander Astin and his colleagues at the American Council on Education, the Freshman Survey is designed to collect a wide range of information on the characteristics of students just as they arrive at college. The data are intended to serve as a baseline for assessing changes in students during the college years. The four-page questionnaire includes questions on students' precollege characteristics, including family background, academic experiences, values, attitudes, life goals, self-ratings, academic major and career aspirations, and expectations for college. Each year, the CIRP collects data on three hundred fifty thousand to four hundred thousand students who constitute the entering first-year classes at approximately six hundred fifty two- and four-year colleges and universities nationwide.

In the forty years since the CIRP's inception, dozens of longitudinal follow-up studies of varying lengths have been conducted. CIRP data have informed seminal books on college students (e.g., Astin, 1977, 1993c; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) as well as hundreds of studies focusing on issues such as racial/ethnic diversity, gender, retention, civic engagement, and dozens of other critical issues in higher education. Publications based on CIRP data have had

an undeniable impact on the field of higher education research and, perhaps more important, the practice of higher education. For an account of CIRP's origins, history, and major trends, see Astin (2003); Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn (2007); and Sax (2003).

This study benefits from two invaluable CIRP databases. The first includes more than 8 million students who participated in the Freshman Survey between 1966 and 2006 at more than one thousand baccalaureate institutions nationwide. The responses of men and women over the past forty years allow us to examine long-term trends in the gender gap. The second major data source is a longitudinal file of students who entered college in 1994 and were followed up in 1998 via the College Student Survey (CSS). The CSS is similar in format to the Freshman Survey and includes information on students' college experiences and their perceptions of college, as well as post-tests of dozens of the items that appear on the Freshman Survey. These longitudinal data enable us to assess how women and men change over the course of college and to explore how college might differentially contribute to those changes.

Organization of This Book

To open up the discussion of college and the gender gap, chapter 2 ("Gender Differences Among Entering College Students") examines male-female differentials among a very recent cohort of students—those who entered college in fall 2006—and discusses present-day gender gaps in the context of long-term trends dating back forty years. Specifically, the chapter focuses on gender differences in the following areas: demographic and financial background; family ties; academic self-confidence and engagement; leisure time; psychological and physical well-being; degree, major, and career aspirations; community orientation; and political and social attitudes.

Chapters 3 and 4 lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork to move the conversation from "How do women

and men differ in college?” to “How are women and men differentially affected by college?” Chapter 3 (“Gender and College Student Development”) offers theoretical frameworks that can be used to understand the development of college women as potentially distinct from that of men. The chapter also discusses the state of empirical research on gender differences in the impact of college. Chapter 4 (“Approaches to Studying Gender and College Impact”) describes how the research for this book was conducted and introduces a model for studying the “conditional” effects of college.

Chapters 5 through 7 tackle this book’s central question: Does college affect women and men differently? These chapters are divided into three broad outcome areas: “Personality and Identity” (chapter 5), “Political and Social Values” (chapter 6), and “Academic Outcomes” (chapter 7). These categories bear some similarity to outcome classifications used by Astin (1993c) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) to facilitate the reader’s comparison of the findings from this study with the results of earlier work, which was conducted almost exclusively on combined samples of women and men. These three chapters examine a total of twenty-six outcomes of college. For each of the outcomes, regression analyses were conducted separately by gender to compare the magnitude and direction of effect for eighty-six college environments and experiences. Though the results are based on complex statistical analyses, they are presented in a way that readers unfamiliar with statistics should be able to access and understand.

Finally, chapter 8 (“Where Should We Go from Here? Implications of the Gender Gap for Campus Practice and Future Research”) brings together the major findings from the book in an attempt to discern patterns of gender difference in the impact of college. It encourages practitioners to consider how they can use these results in their own work and proposes a scholarly agenda to further advance our understanding of gender differences in the impact of college.