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THE USES AND MEANINGS OF THE FEMALE TITLE *MS.*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the use of the female title *Ms.* by students, faculty, and staff at a Midwestern university in the United States using data generated with the written survey used by Donna Lillian (1993) in a similar study in Canada. Findings show that faculty are fairly consistent in their understanding of *Ms.* as a neutral title to be used for all women and are more likely to choose this title than students and staff. Student responses show a wide range of meanings for *Ms.*, with the meanings 'young' and 'single' being the most common. Female students were far less likely to select *Ms.* than male students, showing a gender gap in the student data that is not seen in the staff and faculty responses. These data show multiple meanings and patterns of female title use in the United States today, with little evidence pointing toward a decrease in this variation.

ALTHOUGH *Ms.* AS A TITLE FOR WOMEN did not become a social and political issue until the 1970s, it was originally introduced in the 1930s and was used to some extent in the business community in the 1950s. During the woman's movement that began in the 1960s in the United States, the term was promoted by feminists whose aim was to have a title in widespread use which was equal to the men's title *Mr.*, which does not indicate marital status. Thus, *Ms.* was intended to be used for all women: married and unmarried, divorced and widowed, lesbian and straight, conservative and liberal.

Previous research on *Ms.* shows that the title was never fully adopted and has rarely been seen as neutral. Essentially, three different paradigms for female titles are present in U.S. society. The first is the traditional paradigm, with marital status marked on *Mrs.* and *Miss* for women, but with one title, *Mr.*, for men, regardless of marital status. The second paradigm has equivalent terms for men and women—*Mr.* and *Ms.*—and these terms apply to all adults. The third paradigm involves the use of *Ms.* alongside *Mrs.* and *Miss* to create a three-way distinction for female, while retaining only the title *Mr.* for men. Within this pattern, *Ms.* denotes a grown-up but unmarried woman; that is, it is a title for women who feel they are too old to be called the childish title of *Miss* but are not married and thus cannot be called *Mrs.*

The social patterning of these three different paradigms is complex. The details of such patterning on a university campus in the South Midlands of

the United States is the subject of this paper. However, it must be noted that in addition to the variation across groups of speakers, there is also much intraspeaker variability—that is, individual speakers will sometimes apply one set of rules to select a code, and sometimes another. This variability is shown in the current study and is supported by the many discussions of title use with students, friends, colleagues, and family members which have been triggered by this research project. Some speakers like the traditional pattern, but use *Ms.* in business contexts. Other speakers have adopted the use of *Ms.* as a neutral title but make exceptions when they know that a woman's preference is to be called *Miss* or *Mrs.* Some speakers, as evidenced in Lillian (1993), use *Ms.* for certain types of women regardless of marital status—usually women who hold nontraditional jobs or have ambiguous relationships. The pattern of use of *Ms.* for young adult women who are unmarried is inherently variable, and the results in this study show that the categories of 'young' and 'adult' show cutoffs that range from 18 to 50. Finally, speakers—most notably, many of the students at my university I have spoken to or who participated in this survey—do not have a clear meaning of *Ms.* at all, or have meanings (such as 'abbreviation for *Miss*') which are shared by only a small minority of their peers. Thus, although the following quantitative analysis shows clear patterns of interspeaker and intergroup variation in a university setting, the complexity of these patterns could be further explained by a qualitative study of the social meanings and values of the title *Ms.*

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON MS.

Much of the previous research on *Ms.* has dealt with attitudes toward this title. In two experimental studies, Heilman (1975) collected experimental data about attitudes toward course instructors with different titles from Yale University students and from high school seniors in a New York City school. The participants were given the task of rating course descriptions, which varied in terms of the content (one description had been verified as being more technical than the other) and the use of *Miss*, *Ms.*, *Mrs.*, or *Mr.* with the initials and last name of the instructor. Heilman found that female instructors of courses of a nontechnical nature who chose one of the two more traditional titles (*Mrs.* or *Miss*) were at a disadvantage; students were more willing to take courses offered by instructors who used the title *Ms.* and rated these courses as having higher potential intellectual advantage. This study indicates that *Ms.* is perceived as a more appropriate title for university instructors, especially of material deemed technical.

Other sources from the 1970s and 1980s also indicate that in professional settings, *Ms.* is viewed more positively and is less controversial than in personal interactions. A study by Dion (1987) shows both sides of this issue; while the positive attributes of being achievement oriented and socially assertive are associated with *Ms.*-titled women, so is the negative attribute of being less interpersonally warm. Further research on this issue by Dion and Cota (1991) shows that *Ms.*-titled women are more apt than women with *Miss* or *Mrs.* titles to be assigned agentive traits traditionally deemed “male,” such as independence or competitiveness, including traits considered positive for men but negative for women (e.g., aggressiveness).

Parallel to these findings are the results of Murray (1997), a large-scale survey of attitudes toward *Ms.* in the Midwestern United States. Overall, *Ms.* is associated with women who are independent, outspoken, feminist, and very likely to work outside the home, but who are viewed as less friendly, less attractive, less likely to make a good wife and mother, and less likely to enjoy cooking or going to church than women titled *Miss* or *Mrs.*

Several studies (Erlich and King 1992, 1994; Mills 2003) look at how this image of *Ms.*-titled women is socially constructed. Erlich and King show that the adoption of *Ms.* does not necessarily lead to nonsexist usage of female titles; instead, *Ms.* has taken on a meaning that is not neutral in terms of marital status, but indicates ‘mature yet unmarried adult female’. This meaning of *Ms.*, as will be discussed below, is also found in this study.

Lillian (1993) looks at data from a survey on female title use which asks respondents to pretend that they are working on a mailing list for their company. Given a short description of 15 women, they must decide how to address them, that is, whether to use *Ms.*, *Miss*, or *Mrs.*, and whether to use their birth name, their partner’s last name (if relevant), or a hyphenated name (if given). At the end of the survey, respondents are asked which title they prefer for themselves, and what each female title mean to them.

Lillian’s survey was distributed to undergraduate students at two Canadian universities. Because her population was homogeneous with regard to age and ethnicity, the only demographic factor she analyzed was sex, and she did not find sex of respondent to be significant overall. Her results, as indicated by the title of her article (“She’s Still a Bitch, Only Now She’s Older!”) are in line with the findings in attitudinal studies. Lillian’s data show that although there is awareness of *Ms.* as a neutral title, it is not used across the board; instead, it is more likely to be used for women who have less traditional social profiles (e.g., are not in legally sanctioned heterosexual relationships or practice traditionally male occupations).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The survey done for this study is a replication of Lillian's survey, using the same 15 profiles of women in Lillian's survey (Q1–Q15) and similar open-ended questions about the meaning of each title (see the appendix for a complete copy of the survey). This study seeks to expand on Lillian's work by comparing responses from faculty, staff, and students and analyzing these data in terms of race, age, and level of education in addition to sex.

The student surveys ($N = 291$) were collected in large, general-enrollment courses at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC), and thus this sample reflects the general composition of the undergraduate student body in terms of sex, age, and ethnicity.¹ Surveys from nonnative speakers of English were eliminated from the sample, as there were too few to provide a database from which to compare native and nonnative speaker responses.

The faculty ($N = 74$) and staff ($N = 61$) surveys were collected by an undergraduate research assistant who approached faculty and staff in different buildings on campus. Although this sampling method was less random, it did include faculty from all nine colleges at the university and staff in a wide range of positions (clerical, professional, maintenance, etc.), and a sampling of members of different ethnic groups and both sexes.² As with the students, nonnative speakers' surveys were eliminated from the sample.

Responses to the 15 questions on title selection, along with coded demographic data, were entered into a database for analysis. For the statistical analysis, data were analyzed in terms of *Ms.* answers versus all other answers. A one-way ANOVA was run to assess the significance of five variables (occupational status, level of education, race, age, and sex) for overall answers of *Ms.* versus *Miss* and *Mrs.* answers, and also for individual questions. That is, this test shows if the difference between the rate of selection of *Ms.* and the rate of selection of *Miss* and *Mrs.* was statistically significant or if it could have occurred by chance if participants gave random answers.

A two-way ANOVA was run to assess interactions between variables. This test shows if two variables must be combined to correlate with patterns of responses (e.g., if an intersection between the variables of age and sex explains the groups which differ in their use of *Ms.*). Finally, when significant differences were found between groups, the Tukey post-hoc analysis was performed to ascertain which groups were significantly different from each other. For example, when level of education was significant, the Tukey post-hoc analysis indicated which specific levels of education were significantly different from each other and which were not. All reports of statistical significance assume a p -value of .05 or less.

RESULTS BY DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

There are some general differences between Lillian's findings and those reported here. First, while Lillian did not find a significant difference between male and female respondents when she combined the populations from the two universities, in this study sex is shown to be a significant factor in responses among the student population.

A second marked difference between Lillian's data and mine is found in the results to the final questions of the survey, on the meanings of the titles. Although Lillian's student respondents explicitly indicated that *Ms.* was a neutral or default title and associated it with feminism, in my survey such answers were given exclusively by my faculty population.

The next section briefly summarizes the results of the meanings given to the title by students and faculty in the open-ended questions. Data on each of the demographic factors (occupational status, education, race, sex, and age) and significant findings follow. The subsequent section deals with differences in answers to individual questions, that is, which descriptions of women triggered the most *Ms.* answers. The final section discusses these results.

MEANINGS OF THE THREE TITLES

Answers to the final questions on the survey, which ask respondents what the three female titles mean to them and if any title is equivalent to the male title *Mr.*, clearly indicate that while the faculty have a fairly homogeneous understanding of these titles, the students do not. Of the faculty surveyed, 82.4% gave answers that showed that *Miss* means 'young, unmarried', *Mrs.* indicates 'married woman', and *Ms.* is a neutral title that can be used for all women. One of the 13 respondents who did not follow this pattern answered that he did not use either *Mrs.* or *Miss*; the 12 remaining respondents indicated that *Mrs.* is used to designate a married woman but had varying meanings for *Miss* and *Ms.*, often equating these two titles. Thus, there is a great deal of consensus about the meanings of these titles among the faculty. The only variation is in the meaning of *Ms.* and, to a lesser extent, *Miss*, for the 17.6% of respondents who did not define them as neutral and 'young, unmarried', respectively.

The student responses show no such homogeneity. Not only was there a great deal of variation across respondents, but many of the surveys showed what appear to be internal inconsistencies, for example, giving the answer 'young, under 18' for the meaning for *Miss*, and then listing *Miss* as the equivalent of *Mr.*

Nonetheless, the answers given for these three questions provide an interesting background about the possible meanings of titles for undergraduate students. Because of the large number of surveys and the many different answers given, the tally for the answers given was made by counting the different meanings given for each title; they are not cross-referenced. In addition, some respondents gave more than one meaning, such as, 'widowed or divorced' or 'independent, older woman'; in this case, the answers were counted in each category named. Thus, the total number of meanings given is larger than the number of surveys, and the percentages cited below reflect how many respondents out of the total possible number of respondents gave this answer.

Mrs. is the only title which elicited overall agreement, meaning, as with the faculty, 'married woman'; 225 (77.3%) of the student responses included this meaning. Of these, 7 further specified that it is used for a married woman if she has taken her husband's last name, a consideration which was never mentioned on the faculty surveys. Eight of the respondents gave the meaning of 'widow' for *Mrs.*, usually in addition to stating that it meant 'married'. Seven respondents felt that this title indicated that a woman was 'older', which was indicated by this exact term as well as others ('old lady', 'middle-aged', etc.). No other meanings were given by more than 1% of the respondents.

The meanings given for *Ms.* show the most variation. The most popular answer, given by 42.2% of the student respondents, was 'not married' or 'single', which is in clear contrast to the faculty's majority meaning of neutrality in terms of marital status. The second most popular answer, given by 30.5%, indicated that the meaning of *Ms.* has to do with age. The terms used to describe this included 'older', 'mature', and 'grown-up', and the ages given ranged from over 18 to over 50.

Another meaning of *Ms.* which differs from the faculty answers is 'divorced or separated', which was given by 16.5% of the undergraduate students. Sixteen (5.5%) also included widowed, and 9 (3.1%) indicated that *Ms.* can mean a woman is married but did not take her husband's last name. None of the responses included 'feminist' or any similar term except 'independent', which was given by only 11 (3.8%) of the undergraduate respondents, and might be more of a synonym with 'adult' or 'older' than 'feminist'.

The faculty meaning of this term—neutral, used for all women—was given by only 21% of the respondents, although a quarter of these (13) did not explicitly mention neutrality in terms of marital status.

Finally, meanings for *Miss* also varied among the undergraduate respondents, but there was greater consensus around two characteristics. 'Unmar-

ried' was the most popular answer, with 29.9%, and 'young' was given 23.7% of the time. The combination of these two comprised another 26.1% of the respondents. Thus, 79.7% of the respondents gave the meaning of either young or unmarried, or both.

The last question on the survey asked if any of these titles was equivalent to *Mr.* The undergraduate answers to this question varied widely, and it was clear that many did not understand the question as it was intended: there were a large number of 'yes' answers, some question marks and blanks, and a number of answers which indicated that *Mr.* was not equivalent to the female title because it was used for men, not women. Still others interpreted this question as asking if men and women had equal rights. Of the answers to the intended meaning of the question, the most common (28.2%) was that none of the titles was equivalent to *Mr.* The next most frequent answer was that all were equivalent to *Mr.* (21.3%), while *Ms.* and *Mrs.* were given by 16.2% and 8.2% of the student respondents, respectively. The title *Miss* was given by only one respondent, less than 1%.

The faculty responses to this question were more straightforward. The most popular answer was *Ms.*, which was given by 62.5% of the faculty respondents. Eight percent of the answers indicated that all of these titles were equivalent to *Mr.*, and two respondents named *Mrs.* as the equivalent title. Three others said both *Ms.* and *Mrs.* were equivalent to *Mr.* However, 15 answers (20.3%) indicated that none of the female titles was equivalent to *Mr.* because, in the words of one of these respondents, "Ms. carries baggage that men don't have to deal with."

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

OCCUPATIONAL STATUS. Overall results show that the faculty use *Ms.* far more than student and staff respondents: while faculty respondents selected *Ms.* as a title 83.8% of the time, student respondents selected this title only 61.4% of the time. Overall staff responses of *Ms.* were slightly lower (53.4%). These results are statistically significant overall. A post-hoc test indicates that the significant differences are between faculty and student responses and between faculty and staff responses, but that overall differences between student and staff answers are not statistically significant.

When responses to individual questions were compared according to occupational status, all but one (Q9) were statistically significant when comparing *Ms.* answers to all other answers.

Question 9 involved a 63-year-old retired schoolteacher who had never been married. The *p*-value of this question, although it did not achieve

statistical significance, was approaching significance at .06. The post-hoc analysis showed that student-faculty differences were the greatest, as 14 of the 15 questions showed statistically significant differences for these two groups; only Q9 did not. Of these 14 questions, 9 also showed statistically significant faculty-staff differences, but only 3 of those 9 show statistically significant difference between staff and student responses.

LEVEL OF EDUCATION. Obviously, level of education overlaps heavily with the occupational status results: all of the faculty have graduate degrees (11 had master's degrees and 63 had doctorates), and all of the respondents from undergraduate classes have either a high school diploma or an associate's degree except for three, who had already received bachelor's degrees but were enrolled in undergraduate programs. However, because the levels of education among the staff range from high school diplomas to doctorates, analysis by level of education can help to sort out if it is education or category of occupation which correlates more with *Ms.* use.

The statistical analysis of the results shows highly significant results overall ($p < .001$). All but three individual questions (Q9, Q11, and Q14) show significant differences according to level of education. Question 9, as indicated above, involves a 63-year-old retired schoolteacher who has never been married; both of the women in Q11 and Q14, given below, are women who do not have legal heterosexual relationships.

Q11: Erica Jones-Carter is 43 years old with 3 children in high school. Her partner, Felix Carter, is the father of her children. Erica and Felix have lived common-law for over 20 years, but have never formally been married.

Q14: Lori Owen is 34 and is separated from her husband, Oliver Hanson. He has custody of their children. She attends university and works part-time. When she got married, she changed her last name to Hanson, but now she has gone back to using her own last name.

The post-hoc comparison indicates that the significant differences overall are between respondents holding a doctorate and those in the three lowest groups for educational level (high school diploma, associate's degree, and bachelor's degree). There were no significant differences between respondents with master's degrees and any other groups, and the differences among respondents holding high school diplomas, associate's degrees, or bachelor's degrees were not significant.

There was a great deal more variation in these results for level of education than was found for the occupational status data above. Thus, these results indicate that occupational status of the user is a slightly better predictor of *Ms.* usage than educational level.

RACE. In his survey of Midwesterners, Murray (1997) noted a tendency for African American respondents to be more favorable toward *Ms.* than European American respondents. These data do not support this finding, as overall differences for these two ethnic groups are very small (European American 66.9%, African American 70.0%). The difference between total answers when analyzed according to racial group is not statistically significant ($p = .246$), nor are interactions of race with any other variable found to be statistically significant. However, it must be noted that this sample is not ideal for assessing ethnic variation, as the percentage of respondents who indicated an ethnicity other than European American is small, especially in the faculty data.

AGE. Age differences in selection of *Ms.* versus other titles is significant overall at the level of $p = .018$. A post-hoc analysis indicates that the significant difference is between the youngest age group (18–25) and the middle age group (40–55). However, the significance of age alone as a factor is less meaningful than age as a factor in combination with sex, as illustrated by the descriptive statistics shown in table 1. Although differences between the sexes are not apparent in the older age groups, they are statistically significant at the level of $p < .001$ for age and sex together due to the sex differences within the 18–25 age group.

SEX. Sex of the respondent is a highly significant factor in this study, particularly when analyzed in interaction with other variables. Male respondents overall used *Ms.* at a rate of 74.0% of the time, while female respondents used *Ms.* only 55.9% of the time; this is a statistically significant difference. Sex is also a statistically significant variable for all of the individual questions except Q6, repeated below, which had a p -value of .069.

TABLE 1
Ms. Use by Age and Sex

	<i>Total Number of Ms. Uses</i>
18–25 male ($N = 154$)	1,752/2,310 (75.8%)
18–25 female ($N = 125$)	881/1,875 (47.0%)
26–39 male ($N = 31$)	326/465 (70.1%)
26–39 female ($N = 30$)	281/450 (62.4%)
40–55 male ($N = 31$)	339/465 (72.9%)
40–55 female ($N = 34$)	372/510 (72.9%)
56+ male ($N = 7$)	80/105 (76.2%)
56+ female ($N = 14$)	146/210 (69.5%)
TOTAL ($N = 426$)	4,177/6,390 (65.4%)

Q6: Grace Dawson is a 57-year old widow, who works as a volunteer at a shelter for battered women and children.

However, as shown above in the findings for age, the most interesting results come from the interactions between sex and other variables. Interaction of race and sex is not significant, so the following discussion will concern the interactions between sex and occupational status and sex and level of education.

Descriptive statistics for occupational status and sex are given in table 2, which shows that it is the female students who are using *Ms.* the least. Sex as an individual variable is not found to be significant by the more stringent two-way ANOVA test, but the interaction between sex and status is highly significant with a *p*-value less than .001. The sex differences are greatest within the undergraduate student response pool. As will be discussed in more detail below, male students consistently use *Ms.* at much higher rates than female students.

TABLE 2
Ms. Data by Sex and Occupational Status

	<i>Total Number of Ms. Uses</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	577/705 (81.8%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	354/405 (87.4%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	105/195 (53.8%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	435/720 (60.4%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	1,794/2,445 (73.4%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	912/1,920 (47.5%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	4,177/6,390 (65.4%)

TABLE 3
Ms. Use by Level of Education and Sex

	<i>Total Number of Ms. Uses</i>
Male with doctorate (<i>N</i> = 43)	520/645 (80.6%)
Female with doctorate (<i>N</i> = 23)	284/345 (82.3%)
Male with master's degree (<i>N</i> = 9)	97/135 (71.9%)
Female with master's degree (<i>N</i> = 22)	233/330 (70.6%)
Male with bachelor's degree (<i>N</i> = 6)	48/90 (53.3%)
Female with bachelor's degree (<i>N</i> = 8)	63/120 (52.5%)
Male with associate's degree (<i>N</i> = 31)	324/465 (69.7%)
Female with associate's degree (<i>N</i> = 31)	244/465 (52.5%)
Male with high school diploma (<i>N</i> = 134)	1,501/2,010 (74.7%)
Female with high school diploma (<i>N</i> = 119)	863/1,785 (48.3%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	4,177/6,390 (64.6%)

The results for sex and education, shown in table 3, mirror the results for sex and occupational status. Again, sex is not statistically significant as an individual variable in the results of the two-way ANOVA, but the interaction between educational level and status is highly significant with a *p*-level less than .001.

RESULTS FOR INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Table 4 shows the rankings and percentages of *Ms.* answers given for each individual answer, with a comparison to Lillian's (1993) results. This table is arranged with the survey questions which received the least *Ms.* at the top in a continuum to those who received the most *Ms.* at the bottom. The differences between student and faculty results are statistically significant for all questions except Q9 (the retired schoolteacher); the differences between faculty and staff are statistically significant for eight of the questions (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q7, Q10, Q11, and Q12). The difference between staff and student responses is statistically significant only for Q2, Q5, and Q7.

In the following discussion, descriptions of women who receive the most and least *Ms.* will be analyzed to assess what aspects of their identity lead to use (or nonuse) of *Ms.* Because status appears to be overall the best predictor of *Ms.* use—that is, faculty are much more likely to use *Ms.* than students and staff—and the interactions of this variable with sex have been shown to be highly significant, results for individual questions will be presented in terms of the variables occupational status and sex along with overall percentages.

MARRIED WOMEN. In the final questions in the survey, the most common answer for the meaning of *Mrs.* is 'married'. For both student and faculty surveys, 97.2% of the respondents gave this answer. Thus, this category will be used to examine the answers to individual questions.

Four women described in the survey have current legal heterosexual partners. Three (Q4, Q7, and Q2) are described simply as "married," while a fourth (Q11) is described as having "lived common-law for over 20 years."

There are some clear differences within this group in terms of who receives *Mrs.* as a title. The woman described in Q4 is certainly the most traditional married woman in the survey—she does not work outside the home, has children, and has taken her husband's name. Thus, it is no surprise that the title *Mrs.* is used most frequently for her. However, although she is ranked the lowest for *Ms.* use for both students and faculty (see table 5), the difference between the responses from faculty and students is statisti-

TABLE 4
Rankings and Percentages for Ms. Survey Responses

	<i>Lillian Ranking</i>	<i>Overall Ranking</i>	<i>Student Ranking</i>	<i>Faculty Ranking</i>	<i>Staff Ranking</i>
Q4 (38, homemaker, married, 3 kids)	15 (18%)	15 (28.9%)	15 (25.1%)	15 (54.1%)	14 (18.0%)
Q7 (married, hyphenated name)	14 (22%)	14 (32.2%)	14 (28.9%)	13 (64.9%)	15 (8.2%)
Q2 (35, lawyer, married)	12 (38%)	13 (44.1%)	12 (40.5%)	11 (78.4%)	13 (19.7%)
Q6 (57, widow, shelter volunteer)	11 (44%)	12 (45.1%)	13 (41.2%)	14 (60.8%)	11 (44.3%)
Q5 (17, high school, lives with parents)	13 (28%)	11 (50.2%)	11 (50.2%)	12 (70.3%)	12 (26.2%)
Q11 (43, common-law, kids, hyphenated name)	10 (57%)	10 (69.0%)	10 (66.0%)	tie for 9,10 (87.8%)	10 (60.7%)
Q3 (19, single, mother)	7 (63%)	9 (73.2%)	9 (69.1%)	tie for 5,6,7 (93.2%)	8 (68.9%)
Q12 (29, single, bank employee, will keep name)	5 (68%)	8 (75.4%)	8 (70.4%)	tie for 3,4 (94.6%)	7 (75.4%)
Q1 (23, student, living with boyfriend)	9 (60%)	7 (75.1%)	7 (72.9%)	tie for 5,6,7 (93.2%)	9 (63.9%)
Q9 (63, retired teacher, never married)	8 (62%)	6 (78.4%)	6 (75.6%)	tie for 9,10 (87.8%)	5 (80.3%)
Q13 (83, living alone)	4 (70%)	5 (79.6%)	5 (75.9%)	8 (90.5%)	4 (83.6%)
Q14 (34, separated, resumed use of birth name)	2 (82%)	4 (81.0%)	4 (77.0%)	tie for 5,6,7 (93.2%)	tie for 2,3 (85.2%)
Q10 (27, heavy equipment operator)	6 (66%)	3 (81.2%)	3 (78.0%)	1 (97.3%)	6 (77.0%)
Q8 (42, stock broker, lesbian)	3 (73%)	2 (82.4%)	2 (78.4%)	2 (95.9%)	tie for 2,3 (85.2%)
Q15 (52, divorced, feminist)	1 (83%)	1 (86.2%)	1 (83.5%)	tie for 3,4 (94.6%)	1 (88.5%)

cally significant. This indicates that even for individuals at the extremes of the hierarchy for Ms. use, faculty and students have very different patterns of female title use.

The findings for Q7, given in table 6, follow these same trends. The woman depicted in this question is legally married and has added her husband's last name to her own to create a hyphenated surname. The hyphenated name and work outside the home do not seem significant factors in the use of Mrs., as the overall rate of Mrs. is only slightly lower for this

TABLE 5
Question 4 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	23 (48.9%)	0 (0.0%)	24 (51.1%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	17 (63.0%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (37.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	2 (15.4%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (84.6%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	9 (18.8%)	1 (2.1%)	38 (79.2%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	64 (39.3%)	0 (0.0%)	99 (60.7%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	9 (7.0%)	1 (0.8%)	118 (92.2%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	124 (28.9%)	2 (0.5%)	300 (70.4%)

QUESTION: Leanne Norton is 38 years old. She is a full-time homemaker with three children. Her husband works full-time and supports the family. You would address the letter to ...

TABLE 6
Question 7 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	25 (53.2%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (46.8%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	23 (85.2%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (14.8%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	1 (7.7%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (92.3%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	4 (8.3%)	0 (0.0%)	44 (91.7%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	77 (47.2%)	8 (4.9%)	78 (47.9%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	7 (5.5%)	3 (2.3%)	118 (92.2%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	137 (32.2%)	11 (2.6%)	278 (65.3%)

QUESTION: Fiona Stevens-Harper and her husband, Frank Harper, are co-owners of a small hardware store. You would address the letter to ...

woman than for the most traditional woman described in Q₄ (65.3% overall instead of 70.4%).

Table 7 for Q₂ illustrates that not taking one's husband's name and having a career outside the home may trigger more use of *Ms.*, but for more than half of all respondents this is still outweighed by marital status. The woman in Q₂, who uses her birth name and is a lawyer, still receives *Mrs.* from 55% of the respondents overall. (Most—73.9%—of these responses involved *Mrs. Wilson*, which is the name of her husband; but 26.1% did use the married title *Mrs.* with her birth name, *Parker*.)

Further evidence that being married in the conventional sense is the trigger for the selection of *Mrs.* over *Ms.* lies in the responses to Q₁₁ (see table 8). This woman has made a more conservative name choice than the woman in Q₂ (she uses a hyphenated name instead of using her birth name), and has a long-term relationship with children, all part of the traditional

TABLE 7
Question 2 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	32 (68.1%)	0 (0.0%)	15 (31.9%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.7%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (100.0%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	12 (25.0%)	1 (2.1%)	35 (72.9%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	108 (66.3%)	0 (0.0%)	55 (33.7%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	10 (7.8%)	4 (3.1%)	114 (89.1%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	188 (44.1%)	5 (1.2%)	233 (54.7%)

QUESTION: Elaine Parker is a 35-year-old lawyer, married to Alex Wilson. You would address the letter to ...

TABLE 8
Question 11 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	39 (83.0%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (17.0%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.7%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	6 (46.2%)	1 (7.7%)	6 (46.2%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	31 (64.6%)	5 (10.4%)	12 (25.0%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	129 (79.1%)	7 (4.3%)	27 (16.6%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	63 (49.2%)	20 (15.6%)	45 (35.2%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	294 (69.0%)	33 (7.7%)	99 (23.2%)

QUESTION: Erica Jones-Carter is 43 years old with 3 children in high school. Her partner, Felix Carter, is the father of her children. Erica and Felix have lived common-law for over 20 years, but have never formally been married.

picture. However, she has a common-law marriage and thus does not qualify for the title *Mrs.* in the eyes of many respondents. Only 23.2% selected the title *Mrs.*, compared to the 69.0% who selected *Ms.*

Thus, it seems that the more conventional the relationship, the more the title *Mrs.* is selected. The interesting finding here is not that married women are most often called *Mrs.*; this is hardly startling news. The noteworthy detail of this pattern is that while faculty rates differ by only 33.7% across the four questions, differences for student and staff rates are much higher (42.7% and 62.3%, respectively). Therefore, the pattern of faculty female title use is more consistent with the interpretation of *Ms.* as a title for all women, while most students and staff do not use *Ms.* in this way.

UNMARRIED WOMEN. For speakers who do not use *Ms.* for everyone, it is relatively easy to decide when to use *Mrs.*, as discussed above. However, titles

for other women are less certain. These data indicate that age, occupation, family status, and sexual orientation may all be factors which influence title selection.

Of all the unmarried women, the widow in the survey (Q6) receives the least *Ms.* and the most *Mrs.* As can be seen in table 9, slightly more than half of the responses she receives are *Mrs.* (51.2% overall). In fact, both faculty and students assign this woman more *Mrs.* responses than either of the married women in Q2 and Q11, discussed above. I suggest that her status as a widow plays a role here, as responses to the question "What does the title 'Mrs.' mean to you?" at the end of the survey elicited some responses of 'widow.' In addition, her age of 57 could, for some participants, trigger the response that she is from a generation in which traditional roles and title use for married women were the norm. However, this is clearly not a universal tendency; in addition to the approximately 40% of the faculty surveyed who categorically used *Ms.*, almost half of the male students and over 40% of the staff selected *Ms.* for this woman. Thus, there seems to be a tension between viewing widowhood as an extension of traditional marriage (and selecting *Mrs.*) and viewing it as an uncertain category (to be labeled with *Ms.*). This is exacerbated by the fact that we are not given any information about how traditional her marriage was; that is, we do not know if she took her husband's last name, if she had children, or if she worked outside the home during her marriage.

The other unmarried woman who receives a lower rate of *Ms.* responses is the youngest woman in the survey, described in Q5 (see table 10). According to the responses to the questions at the end of the survey, *Miss* is most commonly associated with young and/or unmarried women, and in keeping with these responses, the description of a 17-year-old elicits the most *Miss* responses of any question in the survey.

TABLE 9
Question 6 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	28 (59.6%)	0 (0.0%)	19 (40.4%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	17 (63.0%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (37.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	6 (46.2%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (53.8%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	21 (43.8%)	1 (2.1%)	26 (54.2%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	77 (47.2%)	2 (1.2%)	84 (51.5%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	43 (33.6%)	13 (10.2%)	72 (56.3%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	192 (45.1%)	16 (3.8%)	218 (51.2%)

QUESTION: Grace Dawson is a 57-year-old widow, who works as a volunteer at a shelter for battered women and children. You would address the letter to ...

TABLE 10
Question 5 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	32 (68.1%)	15 (31.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	20 (74.1%)	7 (25.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	2 (15.4%)	10 (76.9%)	1 (7.7%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	14 (29.2%)	33 (68.8%)	1 (2.1%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	95 (58.3%)	67 (41.1%)	1 (0.6%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	51 (39.8%)	77 (60.2%)	0 (0.0%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	214 (50.2%)	209 (49.1%)	3 (0.7%)

QUESTION: Selina Farley is a 17-year-old high school student living with her parents. You would address the letter to ...

The next youngest woman in the survey is 19, only two years older than the woman in Q₅, but is a single mother. She receives many more *Ms.* responses (see table 11). It seems unlikely that an age difference of two years would elicit such a marked difference in responses, although the significance of being over 18, the legal age for many things in our society, should not be ignored. However, we must also assume that her status as a mother moves her, for many respondents, out of the *Miss* category. Because she is not married, few respondents selected *Mrs.*, so *Ms.* is selected by more than half of the respondents in all categories. Even the female students, who are least likely to choose *Ms.* for any woman, selected *Ms.* 56.2% of the time for this woman. These data reinforce the hypothesis that *Ms.* is a title used for mature unmarried women for whom *Miss* is too childish.

The third youngest woman in the survey is 23—above legal age in the United States—and also involved in a long-term relationship; this is the

TABLE 11
Question 3 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	43 (91.5%)	3 (6.4%)	1 (2.1%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	9 (69.2%)	4 (30.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	33 (68.8%)	13 (27.1%)	2 (4.2%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	121 (74.2%)	40 (24.5%)	2 (1.2%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	72 (56.2%)	47 (36.7%)	9 (7.0%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	304 (71.4%)	108 (25.4%)	14 (3.3%)

QUESTION: Sandra Brant is a 19-year-old single mother living on her own with her child. The child's father, Stan Morris, has no contact with Sandra or the child. You would address the letter to ...

woman described in Q1 (see table 12). This combination of factors triggers a much higher *Ms.* rate for faculty and male students, but both sexes of staff and female students select *Miss* more than 30% of the time. Clearly, the meaning of *Ms.* as neutral (for the faculty) and its use for adult single women (for the students) both contribute to selection of the title for this woman, but there is still strong evidence for the continuing use of *Miss* for young women. This trend is seen in the low rates of *Ms.* selection by the staff, but also by the choices made by young women themselves (i.e., female students). These results also shed light on the analysis of the data for the previous question; because *Miss* is selected more frequently for this 23-year-old in Q1, the choice of *Ms.* for the 19-year-old in Q3 must be triggered by her status as a mother rather than her age.

The next three single women, all under 40, elicit similar patterns of title selection. The title *Ms.* is used by 75.1–81.0% of the respondents for all three of these women. All of the questions show the general pattern of faculty using the most *Ms.*, male students following with about 10% less, staff rates somewhat lower, and female students using *Ms.* the least.

The results for Q12, shown in table 13, show that this 29-year-old who states that she will not take her husband's name if she marries elicits *Ms.* selection by 75.4% of the respondents. However, it is difficult to say if it is her age which places her clearly in the adult category, or her attitude toward retaining her birth name. Certainly the lower rate of *Miss* responses (14.8%) does speak to 29 being out of the *Miss* range, but the presence of her attitude about keeping her name in this question makes the results inconclusive.

The data for Q14, given in table 14, show half as much *Miss* selection for a 34-year-old single woman than for the 29-year-old in Q12. However, age is

TABLE 12
Question 1 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	43 (91.5%)	4 (8.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	9 (69.2%)	4 (30.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	30 (62.5%)	18 (37.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	135 (82.8%)	26 (16.0%)	2 (1.2%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	77 (60.2%)	48 (37.5%)	3 (2.3%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	320 (75.1%)	101 (23.7%)	5 (1.2%)

QUESTION: Julia Allen is a 23-year-old university student. She is not married, but has been living with her boyfriend, Fred Rogers, for two years. You would address the letter to ...

TABLE 13
Question 12 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	44 (93.6%)	2 (4.3%)	1 (2.1%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	8 (61.5%)	3 (23.1%)	2 (15.4%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	38 (79.2%)	3 (6.3%)	7 (14.6%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	135 (82.8%)	18 (11.0%)	10 (6.1%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	70 (54.7%)	36 (28.1%)	22 (17.2%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	321 (75.4%)	63 (14.8%)	42 (9.9%)

QUESTION: Rita Prentice is 29 years old and works at a bank. She thinks she might marry someday, but she has already decided that if she does, she will keep her own last name and not take her husband's name. You would address the letter to ...

TABLE 14
Question 14 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	43 (91.5%)	1 (2.1%)	3 (6.4%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	9 (69.2%)	1 (7.7%)	3 (23.1%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	43 (89.6%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (10.4%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	139 (85.3%)	8 (4.9%)	16 (9.8%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	85 (66.4%)	18 (14.1%)	25 (19.5%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	345 (81.0%)	29 (6.8%)	52 (12.2%)

QUESTION: Lori Owen is 34 and is separated from her husband, Oliver Hanson. He has custody of their children. She attends university and works part-time. When she got married, she changed her last name to Hanson, but now she has gone back to using her own last name. You would address the letter to ...

not the only factor at play here; this woman is separated from her husband, and for many, this seems to triggers *Ms.* use. Clearly this combination of factors motivates respondents in all categories to use *Ms.* at high rates; *Miss* and *Mrs.*, when used, are supplied most often by the young women respondents. This again highlights the ambiguous status of separated or divorced women.

The responses to Q10 indicate that occupation of the woman may play a role in title selection, at least if the occupation is a traditionally male one (see table 15). No partner is mentioned for this woman, and there are consequently few *Mrs.* responses; her relative youthfulness (she is 27) combined with apparently single status qualify her for *Miss* use by 17.1% of the respondents. However, more respondents selected *Ms.* for this woman than for the 29-year-old bank employee who wants to keep her own name

TABLE 15
Question 10 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	46 (97.9%)	1 (2.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	10 (76.9%)	2 (15.4%)	1 (7.7%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	37 (77.1%)	11 (22.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	144 (88.3%)	17 (10.4%)	2 (1.2%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	83 (64.8%)	41 (32.0%)	4 (3.1%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	346 (81.2%)	73 (17.1%)	7 (1.6%)

QUESTION: Allison Moore is 27 years old and works as a heavy equipment operator for the municipality she lives in. You would address the letter to . . .

if she marries. Thus, the only factor which could trigger this higher use of *Ms.* for the woman in Q10 is her occupation—the traditionally masculine, blue-collar job of a heavy equipment operator.

Interestingly enough, the responses for the three women in their late 20s and early 30s (described in Q10, Q12, and Q14) are very similar to the responses for two older women without partners, who in traditional usage would be called *Miss*. The respondents in this survey selected *Miss* for the women in Q9 (a 63-year-old retired teacher) and Q13 (83 years old and living on her own) less frequently than they did for the 17-year-old in Q5, and on the whole no more frequently for the women in their late 20s and 30s. This indicates that *Miss* is deemed more appropriate for young single women than elderly ones.

Q9 is the only question which showed no statistically significant difference for occupational status and is one of three questions that showed no significance for level of education (see table 16). When analyzed according to age, the results were also not significant, although this was the case for 12 of the 15 questions. It is, however, significant for the variable of sex.

Why does this particular question elicit such uniform results across occupational status, levels of education, and age groups? The answer may lie in the fact that the woman described in this question is a stereotypical spinster. She is elderly and has never married—a slight but perhaps significant difference to the woman in Q13 (see table 17), who is merely described as “living on her own.” (The woman in Q13 is also older, and at 83 one could easily imagine that she has outlived her husband, thus putting her in the widow category, which might elicit more *Mrs.* usage.) Finally, the woman in Q9 is a retired schoolteacher, the occupation of old maids in popular culture. Heavy *Ms.* users were likely to use *Ms.* for this speaker, but in every occupational/sex cell, there were respondents who also selected the title *Miss* for this woman,

TABLE 16
Question 9 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	43 (91.5%)	4 (8.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	22 (81.5%)	5 (18.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	12 (92.3%)	1 (7.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	37 (77.1%)	11 (22.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	139 (85.3%)	21 (12.9%)	3 (1.8%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	81 (63.3%)	41 (32.0%)	6 (4.7%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	334 (78.4%)	83 (19.5%)	9 (2.1%)

QUESTION: Mildred Jenkins is a 63-year-old retired teacher. She has never been married. You would address the letter to ...

TABLE 17
Question 13 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	46 (97.9%)	1 (2.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	21 (77.8%)	5 (18.5%)	1 (3.7%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	9 (69.2%)	1 (7.7%)	3 (23.1%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	42 (87.5%)	6 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	140 (85.9%)	14 (8.6%)	9 (5.5%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	81 (63.3%)	24 (18.8%)	23 (18.0%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	339 (79.6%)	51 (12.0%)	36 (8.5%)

QUESTION: Esther Smith is 83 years old and is living on her own. You would address the letter to ...

the title which the traditional paradigm would dictate. Sex differences are apparent within every occupational status group, with women using higher frequencies of *Miss* in every case. A handful of students selected the title *Mrs.* for this woman, despite her unmarried status. This is indicative of the lack of neutral meaning for *Ms.*, the association of *Miss* with young women, and the present, if somewhat tentative, association of *Mrs.* with 'older' women by the student respondents.

Another unmarried woman who elicits a high level of *Ms.* answers is the woman described in Q8 (see table 18). She is clearly an untraditional female in both her occupation (stock broker) and her partner choice (a woman). Based on a comparison to other questions, in particular to the women in Q2 and Q10, a lawyer and a heavy machinery operator, respectively, I suggest that it is not occupation but relationship status which leads to the high rate of *Ms.* use for this woman. The other women who hold traditionally male

TABLE 18
Question 8 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	45 (95.7%)	2 (4.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	11 (84.6%)	2 (15.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	41 (85.4%)	7 (14.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	145 (89.0%)	12 (7.4%)	6 (3.7%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	83 (64.8%)	41 (32.0%)	4 (3.1%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	351 (82.4%)	65 (15.3%)	10 (2.3%)

QUESTION: Barb Elliot is a 42-year-old stock broker who lives with her lesbian lover, Judy Albright. You would address the letter to ...

occupations do not rank nearly as high in terms of *Ms.* use as the woman in Q8, who is described as having a “lesbian lover.” Thus, I think that occupation is a less influential criterion than relationship status. As a lesbian, the woman in Q8 is not included in the realm of *Mrs.* (none of the faculty and staff selected *Mrs.*, and only 10 students did). There is a clear sex difference in the use of title only by the undergraduate student respondents, showing the usual trend in these data: the *Ms.* level for the male students is quite high (89.0%, between the rates of the staff and faculty), but the rate for the female students is the lowest of all groups (64.8%).

The woman who received the highest percentages of *Ms.* overall is the woman described in Q15 (see table 19). It is not surprising that she elicits such a high rate of *Ms.* Her marital status—divorced—is one which elicits a high level of uncertainty; although she may wish to be *Mrs.*, there is an equal

TABLE 19
Question 15 by Sex and Status

	<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Miss</i>	<i>Mrs.</i>
Male faculty (<i>N</i> = 47)	44 (93.6%)	1 (2.1%)	2 (4.3%)
Female faculty (<i>N</i> = 27)	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Male staff (<i>N</i> = 13)	11 (84.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (15.4%)
Female staff (<i>N</i> = 48)	43 (89.6%)	3 (6.3%)	2 (4.2%)
Male students (<i>N</i> = 163)	146 (89.6%)	6 (3.7%)	11 (6.7%)
Female students (<i>N</i> = 128)	97 (75.8%)	20 (15.6%)	11 (8.6%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 426)	367 (86.2%)	31 (7.3%)	28 (6.6%)

QUESTION: Mary Walston is 52 years old and is divorced. She has just been elected to chair the organization Feminists for Safe Transit Systems. You would address the letter to ...

chance that she may resent the use of the married title. Furthermore, she is described as the chair of a feminist organization, so for those who associate feminism with *Ms.* use, this is also a factor.

CONCLUSION

A written survey of the type used in the study has many limitations. One is that in many parts of the United States, the pronunciation of *Mrs.* is [mɪz], in other words, identical to *Ms.* It is not clear how this may have influenced these data, but it is possible that it created ambiguity for some respondents. Another limitation is that the forced choice in the survey task is somewhat unrealistic; many people do not use titles at all to address envelopes or address women in spoken interactions.

Nonetheless, these data shed light on who uses *Ms.* and for whom. People of both sexes over the age of 40, especially those with a doctorate and in faculty positions, are those most likely to use *Ms.* across the board as a neutral title for all women. Those least likely to use *Ms.* are young female undergraduate students. We see that the title *Ms.* has a web of meanings: as a neutral title; as a title for young (yet adult) single women; and as a default title when the addressee does not fit traditional categories.

What is especially striking about these data is that the use of *Ms.* is significantly different for male and female undergraduate students. That is, male students use *Ms.* at much higher rates than female students, often more than the generally older staff respondents.

How can we interpret these results? The data do not support age-grading (i.e., that these young students will grow up, finish their education, join the work force, and start using *Ms.*) for several reasons. First, age-grading does not explain the sex differences among the students; it is only young women who use very low rates of *Ms.* Second, age-grading does not explain the significant differences in *Ms.* use between those with doctorates and those without graduate degrees. These results suggest that it is not merely aging, but what you do while aging, that influences *Ms.* use. Further, many of the undergraduate respondents will never obtain a doctorate, the level of education which is correlated with higher *Ms.* use, so there is no reason to expect that they will use the higher levels of *Ms.* associated with that level of education. Third, the age-grading explanation is not supported by the staff results. Staff are older than students (none are under 26, while 94.5% of the students are) but do not use *Ms.* more than students. On the whole the staff responses, which are fairly uniform across the two sexes, indicate less use of *Ms.* than the male students, although more than the female students.

Instead, the most valid interpretation of these results involves the evolution of the meaning of *Ms.* over time and the development of variation in its use. *Ms.* is not dying out; instead, the title *Ms.* is used in addition to, and sometimes instead of, *Mrs.* and *Miss.* Thus, all three patterns described in the introduction to this article persist. Among the faculty, the best represented pattern is the use of *Ms.* as a neutral title; this pattern is also found among the male students. The staff and the female students show more traditional patterns, with some evidence that *Ms.* means young and single instead of being a neutral term for all women.

The difference between the male and female students remains a significant and rather surprising result. It reflects the adoption of *Ms.* as a neutral term by male students—most of whom are under 26—despite the fact that their female peers do not use the title in this way. While one aspect of this difference may be linked to the fact that women can project their own title preferences onto others, while men are not in the position to do so, this does not negate the fact that male students have adopted a pattern of *Ms.* use which is similar to the intended neutral meaning of the title.

However, while this adoption of *Ms.* as a neutral title by some segments of the population is shown in this study, there is also clear evidence for the recognition of its variability. The title *Ms.* is used more frequently by all respondents (regardless of age, sex, occupational status, race, or level of education) when the woman being addressed does not clearly fit into either the ‘single’ or ‘married’ category (e.g., divorced or lesbian). Also, there is evidence that women who defy traditional female roles are called *Ms.* more frequently. In particular, women who do not have clearly defined heterosexual marriages (e.g., women in relationships described as “common law”) are also more likely to be called *Ms.* This is what I call the “default” use of *Ms.*—the title to choose when a woman cannot be put into a *Miss* or *Mrs.* category.

Thus, a variety of meanings attach to *Ms.*: the developing transitional meaning, used for women who are too old to be *Miss* but not (yet) married; the default meaning, for use when marital status is ambiguous or nontraditional; and the neutral meaning, where *Ms.* is used across the board instead of *Miss* and *Mrs.* All three meanings are used not only in this university community, but within occupational groups and even by individual speakers. Therefore, instead of *Ms.* solidifying in one meaning, its variability in meaning and use appears to be here to stay.

APPENDIX
The Survey Questions

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Age:

Sex:

Occupation (please check appropriate category and specify if relevant):

 student—undergraduate: please specify career goal _____ student—graduate: please specify career goal _____ faculty at SIUC staff at SIUC: please specify type of work performed _____

Race/Ethnicity:

Last level of education completed (please circle):

High school degree Associate's Degree Bachelor's Degree

Master's Degree Ph.D.

INSTRUCTIONS

Suppose the company you work for is doing a mailing to all its women clients. You have been given a list of the clients, along with whatever personal information is on record. Your job is to prepare the mailing labels. How will you address the letter to each of the women described on the following pages? You must choose one of the options provided for each woman. CHECK ONLY ONE CHOICE FOR EACH WOMAN.

1. Julia Allen is a 23-year-old university student. She is not married, but she has been living with her boyfriend, Fred Rogers, for two years. You would address the letter to:

<input type="checkbox"/> Ms. Allen	<input type="checkbox"/> Ms. Rogers	<input type="checkbox"/> Miss Allen
<input type="checkbox"/> Miss Rogers	<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. Allen	<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. Rogers

2. Elaine Parker is a 35-year-old lawyer, married to Alex Wilson. You would address the letter to:

<input type="checkbox"/> Ms. Parker	<input type="checkbox"/> Ms. Wilson	<input type="checkbox"/> Miss Parker
<input type="checkbox"/> Miss Wilson	<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. Parker	<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. Wilson

3. Sandra Brant is a 19-year-old single mother living on her own with her child. The child's father, Stan Morris, has no contact with Sandra or the child. You would address the letter to:

<input type="checkbox"/> Ms. Brant	<input type="checkbox"/> Ms. Morris	<input type="checkbox"/> Miss Brant
<input type="checkbox"/> Miss Morris	<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. Brant	<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. Morris

4. Leanne Norton is 38 years old. She is a full-time homemaker with three children. Her husband works full-time and supports the family. You would address the letter to:

<input type="checkbox"/> Ms. Norton	<input type="checkbox"/> Miss Norton	<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. Norton
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5. Selina Farley is a 17-year old high school student living with her parents. You would address the letter to:

<input type="checkbox"/> Ms. Farley	<input type="checkbox"/> Miss Farley	<input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. Farley
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15. Mary Walston is 52 years old and is divorced. She has just been elected to chair the organization Feminists for Safe Transit Systems. You would address the letter to:

___ Ms. Walston ___ Miss Walston ___ Mrs. Walston

PREFERENCES/OPINIONS:

1. What title do you prefer for yourself (if you circle more than one, please explain):

Ms. Miss Mrs. Mr. Dr. Other _____

Explanation, if relevant:

2. What does the title "Ms." mean to you?
3. What does the title "Miss" mean to you?
4. What does the title "Mrs." mean to you?
5. Are any of these title for women equivalent to the male title, "Mr."?

Thank you for your time!

NOTES

I would like to thank Krassimira Charkova for her advice and assistance in the statistical analysis of these data. Any errors in this analysis are, of course, my own.

1. These data were found to be representative of the student body when compared to enrollment statistics from SIUC for fall 2002. Sex distribution in my sample was exactly the same as campus-wide, 56% male and 44% female. Minority students included in the survey accounted for 19% of the sample, compared to 17.6% at SIUC.
2. These data were found to be representative of the faculty and staff in terms of sex and ethnicity when compared to fall 2002 statistics for SIUC. For the faculty, ethnic minorities are somewhat underrepresented, at 8%, compared to a campus-wide rate of 14%. This is due to the fact that many of the faculty who are classified as ethnic minorities are foreign, and surveys from nonnative speakers of English were not included in this sample. For staff, the percentage of respondents from ethnic minorities (11%) is very similar to the campus-wide rate (10%). Sex distribution also showed representative sampling. The faculty sample contained 35% women and 65% men, as compared to the 40%-60% split on campus, respectively. Statistics for sex distribution on all staff were not available; however, available figures for secretarial staff show that 92% are women, while in professional positions 55% are women. This sample includes staff in both of these occupational categories (as well as others), and the figures (79% women and 21% men) reflect the dominance of women in these positions.

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