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Our University: Enrollment and Gender

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Our University: Enrollment and Gender

Second in a series on who our students are and how they perform.

Great universities help people come into their own. Intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and moral development is always a personal matter but good learning environments are catalysts for the growth of human potential.

Parents can only give good advice or put them [children] on the right paths, but the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands.

Anne Frank: *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952) entry for July 15, 1944

According to a United Nations update on world population of June 10, 2010, there were 103 women for every 100 men in the United States. The lowest proportion of women is Qatar at 33 women per 100 men; the highest proportions are Latvia, Estonia and the Ukraine, each with 117 women per 100 men. The world average for 260 nations is 100.5 women for every 100 men. In short, there are more women than men.

The same trend, albeit more pronounced, exists in higher education in the U.S. A *NewsHour Extra* reported a remarkable rate of change: between 1997 and 2007 female enrollment increased by 63%, while males only increased by 32%. In 2009, 74% of women who graduated from high school enrolled in college, while men enrolled at a rate of 66%. Just three decades ago male students outnumbered their female counterparts in universities.

Universities not attentive to the importance of gender balance in students and in employees will miss a train that is already rolling out of the station.

The causes and social changes that lead to this change in enrollment are many: the growing stereotype that men are too aggressive and competitive for academic work, the popularization of feminism in the seventies opening more career opportunities for women, the degradation of the traditional role of women in the home - a trend on the decrease, reduction in the number of men wanting to attend college, women increasingly becoming primary bread winners driving up the benefits of college attendance, and high school boys more likely to be expelled from high school, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

But women lag in occupying leadership positions on college campuses. Twenty percent of the college presidents in the United States are women, and, while no definitive data exist, there is probably a building correlation between female enrollment and females in university leadership positions. Of interest, women earn more baccalaureate and master's degrees but fewer Ph.D.s than their male brethren. This will change in the coming decades too.

And, unlike the popular comedy starring Mel Gibson and Helen Hunt, *What Women Want*, I think the answer is clear. Women want quality and will enroll where they believe it exists.

Some research universities post enrollments, bucking the national trend, - 55% men and 45% women, but it's not good news really.

In a few cases, program disparity or tradition may account for the against-the-grain imbalance, but evidence does not show that.

Confounding issues.

To add another log-on-the-fire, college enrollment among African American males and females follow the same trends according to the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. If universities want gender balance, it is a color blind issue. Like their white sisters, black women account for nearly 60% of all first time African Americans on college campuses, and this is true at Historically Black Colleges and Universities as well as traditional majority institutions.

The students, especially females, at some of the most prestigious universities in America see the trend and don't care much for it. In a New York Times story from February 5, 2010, Alex Williams suggests that, "*North Carolina, with a student body that is nearly 60 percent female, is just one of many large universities that at times feel eerily like women's colleges.*" And some institutions are suffering to the extent that towns are being renamed, "*Some women at the University of Vermont, with an undergraduate body that is 55 percent female, sardonically refer to their college town, Burlington, as 'Girlington.'*"

Universities serve best when they know who, why, when and how to serve. Forgetting women or men and their needs and aspirations is a recipe for lost opportunity.