



Board of Regents Student Committee

Why the Difference?

A Study of Gender Disparity at St. Olaf

SGA

Student Government Association
St. Olaf College

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A Study of Gender Disparity at St. Olaf

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A report by the
Board of Regents Student Committee

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Summary

Over the past twenty years, colleges and universities across the nation have noticed an increasing disparity between the number of males and females composing their student bodies. St. Olaf reflects national trends in gender disparity at multiple levels in the life of the college. Programs ranging from classes in the Spanish and physics departments to study abroad programs all manifest differences in the experiences of St. Olaf men and women. The Board of Regents Student Committee sought to examine the impact of gender disparity not only on the college, but also on St. Olaf students.

On this topic, St. Olaf largely follows national trends. As the first section of the report details, females now make up 57% all undergraduate college students and more than half of all graduate students. At St. Olaf, women constitute 54.8% of the college, paralleling national rates. Obviously, the make up of the student body closely correlates with the college's applicant pool each year. Not surprisingly, 57.4% of St. Olaf's 2009 applicant pool was female. The reasons for this trend have led to intense speculation by college officials. One striking aspect in both St. Olaf and national admissions trends is that although men and women have nearly identical standardized test scores, women have much higher high school grade point averages than their male counterparts. This may suggest a stronger motivation in high school females for academic achievement than in high school males. Dean of Enrollment Michael Kyle '85 suggests that other factors such as geographic location and school size may also play a role in St. Olaf's male to female ratio.

In its research, BORSC also sought to understand student perspectives on gender relations and gender disparity at St. Olaf. As in past years, the committee employed surveys, interviews, and a whiteboard for public comments to solicit student opinion. Student comments covered a range of spectrums and were often insightful. Our survey discovered that although few students report that gender disparity is a problem, it may have a profound impact on academic life, shaping the make up of courses and the nature of class discussions. Other students complained that certain majors are largely dominated by one sex or the other.

Finally, gender disparity shares a complex relationship with the curriculum, extracurricular activities, and residential experience at St. Olaf. In addition to one gender being heavily enrolled in certain majors, females have dominated enrollment in St. Olaf's off-campus programs, making up 63.5% of participants in 2008-2009. Furthermore, college officials note that males and females tend to adopt distinct patterns of involvement in extracurricular activities. Statistically, males favor athletics and assume more prominent student leadership positions, while females tend to excel in roles described as "relational." These patterns have been manifested in the relationships between Residence Life staff and residents as well.

Ultimately, the question of gender disparity is one that demands closer examination. It is important to be sensitive to the different experiences of men and women at the college as these can play a heavy role in shaping individuals' academic and extracurricular pursuits.

Introduction

The topic of gender disparity at St. Olaf is certainly not a typical focus for a Board of Regents Student Committee report. On the surface, it bears little of the gravity boasted by previous reports on topics such as the use of the college's lands, the alcohol policy, or the "feel" of St. Olaf. Nonetheless, the issue is one that can have profound long-term effects for the college. At the heart of the question is the make up of St. Olaf's student body and the experience those students have both in and out of the classroom. As such, gender disparity and gender relations on campus can shape St. Olaf's identity as a national college dedicated to diversity and a global, inclusive perspective.

The topic originally arose from observations that certain majors and certain programs are heavily dominated by one gender. Residence Life has often had difficulty finding male staff members in past years, and females commonly constitute two-thirds or more of the students participating in off-campus programs. Certain majors are likewise well-known for their popularity with either men or women. These patterns are not unique to St. Olaf, but that does not lessen the need to examine them.

The findings of the committee in this report are not necessarily alarming, nor are they always surprising. Gender disparity does not immediately threaten higher education in general or St. Olaf in particular. We do hope, however, that this report will prove to be an insightful aid for both administrators and the Board of Regents as the college seeks to understand the wider national trend, its causes, and St. Olaf's response to it. The recommendation issuing from the committee's research, if any, is an exhortation to sensitivity when admitting students and a need for further understanding of how gender disparity might affect life at St. Olaf in the long-term.

A report on such a topic requires thoughtfulness regarding individual concerns and exceptions to larger trends. This report is built on patterns both at the national and local levels, and any attempt to draw insight from these patterns must necessarily entail generalizations. Thus, statements that females or males tend to occupy certain roles should be read neither as affirmations of those circumstances, nor as facts lacking exceptions. The topic also demands sensitivity toward students who do not identify with either heterosexuality or a dichotomous division between male and female. This further underscores the complexity and depth of gender relations, as well as the impact that the topic can have on both individuals and institutions alike.

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National Trends

Gender disparity on college campuses has been a national trend for some time, and St. Olaf is no exception. Colleges have been noting an imbalance between male and female populations as early as the 1980s, and a national female majority in college enrollments was established around 1990.¹ The disparity has only grown from there, and current studies suggest that nationally, 57% of all undergraduate students are female.² Likewise, a 2007 report by the U.S. Department of Education indicates that women make up a similar proportion (58%) of students earning four-year degrees.³

St. Olaf has long been a part of this trend. College research and data collection indicate a disparity between the number of males and females attending St. Olaf since 1994. The enrollment gap between the sexes, however, has decreased in more recent years. The percentage of females at the college reached a high of 59.1% in 2002-2003. It has since slowly fallen, reaching 54.8% for the 2008-2009 academic year.

Reasons for this national trend are still being hotly discussed. Concerns about video games and underage drinking have been raised as possible causes behind the disparity. No one, however, has come to a definitive answer as to why the number of females applying to college in recent decades has increased so greatly, while the number of male applicants has remained mostly stagnant. Consequently, college admissions officers and administrators wonder if this trend is a cause for alarm and if measures need to be taken to address it.

Vice President and Dean of Enrollment Michael Kyle '85, candidly admits that although he does not necessarily consider an applicant's gender when reviewing an application, he cannot help but see whether the potential Ole is a male or female. "People will tell you," Kyle said, "that getting into St. Olaf as a female is harder than as a male. And they might be right." St. Olaf's admissions statistics may support this claim.

For the Class of 2013, St. Olaf received 1656 male applicants and 2226 female applicants. In line with national trends, males and females respectively composed 42.6% and 57.4% of the applicant pool. Roughly equal percentages of male and female applicants were accepted from the pool, at 57.6% and 57.3%, respectively. This indicates that the college is admitting more women than men, although both sexes enjoy the same acceptance rate. The difference in the number of male and female applicants may be rooted in their respective academic preparation in high school. Although males and females had identical average ACT scores and roughly the same SAT score, the two genders had very different high school GPAs. The average high school GPA of an incoming

¹ Adams, Dia and Mark Mather. "The Crossover in Female-Male College Enrollment Rates." February 2007. Population Reference Bureau. 20 Sept. 2009.

<<http://www.prb.org/Articles/2007/CrossoverinFemaleMaleCollegeEnrollmentRates.aspx>>.

² Marklein, Mary Beth. "College Gender Gap Widens: 57% Are Women." *USA Today*. 19 Oct. 2005. 20 September, 2009. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2005-10-19-male-college-cover_x.htm>.

³ United States. Department of Education. *Postsecondary Institutions in the United States: Fall 2007*. October 2008. 28 Sept. 2009 <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008159rev.pdf>>.

female first year at St. Olaf was 3.65, while the average male high school GPA was only 3.45.

It seems that a major reason for these trends may lie in differences of academic dedication throughout high school. High school males are capable of matching standardized test scores of high school females, a measurement that focuses mostly on short-term objectives. For example, the average SAT scores for the class of 2009 indicated that overall, males scored higher than females. On average, males scored a 1523, while females scored 1496. Males performed better in math, while females scored higher in writing. The two genders received similar averages on the reading comprehension section.⁴

The problem, then, does not seem to be a result of aptitude, but may lie instead in the factors of college admissions that require a long-term effort by applicants, namely high school GPA. High school males across the nation seem far less likely to invest the time and energy to sustain a higher GPA over four years than their female counterparts. Supporting this notion is the fact that a greater percentage of student taking the SAT was female (53.5%), indicating a less obvious motivation for education in male students. Arguably, it may be that differences in motivation during high school lie at the root of the gender disparity seen in higher education.

Whatever the cause of gender disparity at St. Olaf, it can have a profound effect on admissions, especially when coupled with geographic concerns. A slight preference for male applicants can be seen in the number of students admitted by state. In the two states from which St. Olaf historically draws its greatest number of applicants, male applicants were preferred over female applicants. In Minnesota, 59.1% of males were accepted, as opposed to 50.6% of females. In Wisconsin, the disparity was even more recognizable, with an astounding 63.7% of males and 39.2% of females accepted.

Kyle recognizes these statistics as results of general male-female trends in college applications and expectations. Male applicants, he suggests, are more likely to attend bigger colleges and universities, and generally gravitate toward larger cities. Female applicants, on the other hand, seem to indicate less of a preference for these characteristics. With large universities in St. Paul and Madison, male applicants from Minnesota and Wisconsin are drawn away from the states' smaller institutions. Admissions counselors are then forced to draw more deeply from the ranks of male applicants from these states, possibly at the expense of female applicants.

This national trend of gender disparity does not stop at college admissions. Disparities in college-level activities have been noted across the nation as well. Females are more vocal in classes, they are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities such as music and clubs and are often an overwhelming majority in many study abroad programs. A recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics notes that "females were more likely than their male peers to participate in music or other performing arts,

⁴ Marklein, Mary Beth. "SAT Scores Show Disparities by Race, Gender, Family Income." *USA Today*. 26 Aug. 2009. 26 Sept. 2009 <<http://www.usatoday.com/news/education>>.

belong to academic clubs, work on the school newspaper or yearbook, or participate in the student council or government.”⁵ In addition, a study by the Institute of International Education indicates an overall 2:1 female-male ratio in participation in study abroad programs, with women making up more than 65% of those students who chose to study abroad.⁶

Statistics also indicate a higher level of females entering graduate programs. According to the Digest of Education Statistics, “since 1984, the number of females in graduate schools has exceeded the number of males.” From 1997-2007, the number of females entering graduate school rose by 63%, while the number of males only grew by 32%. In addition, “since the mid-1980s, more females than males have earned associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees.”⁷

Gender disparity in St. Olaf’s admissions and student body ultimately reflects a wider trend in education across the United States. Although the pattern of gender disparity isn’t necessarily a reason for concern, it certainly is a motive for further research and inquiry. Nationally and locally, we need to further understand not only the causes behind gender disparity in education, but also the impact it may hold for colleges, universities, and education as a whole.

Student Perspectives

To further understand the impact of gender disparity on St. Olaf, the Board of Regents Student Committee undertook an extensive research campaign to gather students’ perspectives on the issue. This was done by collecting students’ comments on a public white board and by a short survey.

The subcommittee studying students’ perspectives placed the white board in Fireside in order to give students an open forum to voice opinions with the prompt “What is it like to be male at St. Olaf?” displayed on one side. Interestingly, in reaction to the original query, someone added a new question on the other side of the white board asking, “What is it like to be female at St. Olaf?” Responses to the prompts ranged from one word answers such as “awesome” to mini-essays about the sociology of sexuality. After a few days in Fireside, the entire board was covered in comments.

We also asked students to participate in a survey. We set up a table with the now-filled white board nearby to attract students and to start conversations. The survey table was located outside the cafeteria during dinner hours on a Sunday and Monday evening. This made us available to a vast majority of the student body who wanted to ask questions and share opinions with us. The survey consisted of 4 short-answer questions. We had 134 male

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics. “Extracurricular Activities.” *Trends in Educational Equity of Girls and Women: 2004*. 2004. 28 Sept. 2009 <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/equity/Section6.asp>>.

⁶ Redden, Elizabeth. “Women Abroad and Men at Home.” *Inside Higher Ed*. 4 Dec. 2008. 29 Sept. 2009 <<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/12/04/genderabroad>>.

⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. “Postsecondary Education.” *Digest of Education Statistics*. 2008. 20 Sept. 2009 <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/ch_3.asp>.

respondents and 167 female respondents. Overall, females offered lengthier answers than males. Both sexes commented on the fact that in most classrooms females were more visible than males. Lastly, we asked whether or not students notice a gender disparity at St. Olaf. An overwhelming majority of the responders answered, "No."

Of the 167 females surveyed, 35% were aware of a male-female disparity on campus. However, only 5% reported that the disparity is a problem. A majority of females (62%) said that an imbalanced male-female ratio does not affect their classroom experience, but a significant minority (38%) thought otherwise. As evidence of this gender gap, females cited certain majors as being heavily female-dominated (Sociology/Anthropology, English, Social Work, foreign languages) and others as being overwhelmingly male (Economics, Physics). Many (14% of female respondents) cite a "missing male perspective" and others note that "discussions are always more interesting with a good number of each sex present." Whether these responses reflect St. Olaf's overall female-skewed sex ratio or are simply the product of certain majors being more popular based on sex is debatable. The fact remains, however, that learning environments are negatively affected by gender imbalance, at least in some departments.

Of the 134 males surveyed, 44% were aware of the male-female disparity on campus, however no males identified the disparity as a problem. Male respondents noted a discrepancy in many sectors of campus life, including extracurricular activities, intramural sports, theatre, music, and residential life. Like female students, males cited certain majors where the gender gap is overwhelmingly obvious. Respondents perceived that males gravitate toward the science departments, while more females participate in the humanities and languages. Although aware of the difference in the presence of each sex on campus, a substantial majority of males (83%) did not notice any effects of skewed male-female ratios on their classroom experience. Only a small minority (17%) thought that the disparity affected the classroom. Those who did notice this difference expressed experiences of feeling overpowered by females in class discussions when few males were present. They sensed that females had strength as a collective and might influence men to be quieter. One respondent commented, "Some discussion topics seem untouchable if many women are present." Many respondents clearly stated that they desired to have more men in class with them, especially in the humanities, to create a better balance in academic departments. One respondent brought up the view that both sexes play a unique role in the classroom and should be adequately represented. Alternatively, those that thought disparity has little effect on the classroom stated that one would receive a good academic experience at St. Olaf regardless of a skewed male-female ratio. Such respondents stated that the gender gap has no effect on either the quality of discussion in class or on the talent and intellect of St. Olaf students.

In other data collected about the participation of students outside of the classroom, females exhibit a high degree of participation in school activities and in employment, both off- and on-campus. 37% of females reported

involvement in 1-2 activities, 60% in 3-5, and 8% in 6 or more. 75% are employed on campus (61% in a work-study position, 14% employed otherwise), and 5% work off-campus. Males reported similar experiences: 27% report involvement in 1-2 activities, 60% in 3-5, and 13% in 6 or more. A substantial 84% of male respondents have a school year job. 77% are employed on campus (66% in a work-study position, 11% otherwise employed) and 7% work off-campus.

Thus, although few students report that the ratio of females to males on campus presents a problem, it would seem that it can radically affect academics at the college. Often, students cited a lack of input from male students, allowing female views to play a larger role in academics. This problem can be especially pronounced or even reversed in certain courses, depending on the field of study. Nonetheless, the impact of gender disparity seems to be limited, as men and women participate in activities on campus in similar numbers.

The St. Olaf Experience and Gender Disparity

The St. Olaf academic experience is an important topic in discussions of gender imbalances on campus. To complement student perspectives, members of BORSC met with Spanish Professor Gwendolyn Barnes-Karol, Chair of the Faculty Curriculum Committee. During the discussion, she confirmed the existence of gender disparity between academic departments and majors at St. Olaf. She noted that while many of the humanities are dominated by females, majors like physics, mathematics, and economics are heavily male. These imbalances become increasingly lopsided as students progress into higher level courses, the defining courses of their majors. Barnes-Karol also pointed out that ten percent of a class is a good male enrollment in an upper division Spanish course. "We lose diversity [in classes] with this gender imbalance," concluded Professor Barnes-Karol.

One area of the curriculum in which gender disparities are apparent is study abroad programs. Statistics provided by Kathy Tuma, Associate Director of International and Off-Campus Studies, showed that males only constituted 36.5% of the 808 total students who participated in an off-campus program last year. Barnes-Karol further added that this imbalance had been observed as early as 2001 when an unpublished St. Olaf faculty report found that the most cited reason for not studying abroad was participation in athletics or music. This reason is unlikely to be the only or even primary explanation for why such large gender disparities exist. But, the Office of International and Off-Campus Studies has had difficulty identifying other explanations and developing ways to encourage male participation.

As discussed in the previous section, BORSC conducted a student survey in an effort to quantify the gender imbalances in areas of St. Olaf's curriculum. The primary question posed on the survey asked, "Do male-female ratios affect your classroom experience?" Of 167 female respondents, 38% reported that the existing ratios do affect their classroom experience while only 17% of 134 males

felt affected. Female respondents also noted that the under-representation of males in class leads to one-sided discussions lacking diversity of thought. One student stated, "In discussions, men have different voices and you don't hear those voices if there [are no] guys in class."

Conversely, some males feel that when classes are dominated by females, "discussions become feminist in view and guys get overpowered." Most male respondents, however, did not notice or did not feel any substantial effects due to the imbalance on their classroom experience. As a result, while the survey indicates the gender imbalance has substantial effects upon female education, negative effects on the male experience remain unclear. It is possible, however, that prevailing imbalances are self-perpetuating. The sexes may segregate themselves based upon where they feel their voice is most represented, and therefore, most comfortable. If so, this would lead to males and females directing their educations towards majors with gender breakdowns in their favor.

Athletics is another important component of the St. Olaf experience that is affected by gender disparities. There are more male athletes on campus than female. One likely reason for this is the large football program at St. Olaf. Athletic Director Matt McDonald noted that males may be more interested in junior varsity (JV) athletics than females, as there are significantly more male than female JV programs. In the years 2007-2008, there were 373 male athletes at St. Olaf compared to 231 female athletes. This means that 61% of all intercollegiate athletes are male at St. Olaf. This does not include the similarly proportioned participation in club sports. There are four major female club sports and five major male club sports. McDonald also reported that there are at least twice as many males participating in intramurals compared to females. Kevin Cook, the Director of Intramural and Club Sports, confirmed this statistic and further added that 66% of all intramural athletes are male. When compared to the college-wide ratio of 3 men to 4 women, these statistics indicate that athletics are a more integral part of the male St. Olaf experience. Perhaps this helps account for their under-representation in other areas of college life.

Differences between male and female experiences are also noted in other forms of extracurricular activity. Associate Dean of Students Pamela McDowell noted the Student Government Association (SGA) as an area where participation is patterned by gender. Specifically, McDowell observed that males tend toward more visible roles on campus, such as SGA senator. On the other hand, females tend to occupy roles in areas such as hall council that are less visible and more task-oriented. SGA Executive positions for 2009-2010 are occupied by 10 males and 8 females with males taking on more authoritative roles in positions such as SGA President, Political Awareness Committee Chair, and the Board of Regents Student Committee Chair. Female representatives seem to head more relational, behind the scenes roles such as the SGA Executive Assistant, SGA Vice-President, and Student Alumni Association chair. Additionally, in the past four years there has only been one female SGA President.

To gather information regarding gender differences in Residence Life, we hosted a student panel comprised of three female and three male representatives of the Residence Life staff. These students were either former or current Residential Assistants (RAs) in upper-class residence halls or Junior Counselors (JCs) living in first year residence halls. One major difference they noted is that females tend to be more relational while men tend to find a tight knit group based on a common experience. Anecdotally, two JCs noticed that their first-year female corridors started getting involved in activities very early in their first semester, using their corridor e-mail aliases to help organize events and continually meeting others in their respective halls. Even a senior RA in Ytterboe noticed that her upper class residents still help organize corridor events in order to meet new people. The male JCs, however, stated that starting as first years, their male residents were not active in organized events, instead preferring to attend events that were hosted spontaneously. In addition, they noted that males will find a group of friends early on and, as upperclassmen, stay with their group, uninterested in actively pursuing new friendships.

McDowell stated that when males do not find a group of friends early on, they have a more difficult time sharing their friendship struggles. Where females will open up to their JCs, males will seclude themselves and lose themselves in individual activities, such as video gaming, online networking, or making excuses due to their other time consuming activities. Furthermore, as males tend not to actively pursue support, this could play a role in their academic success. Statistics from the Dean of Students Office show that for the 2008-2009 school year there were 148 males who were subject to some type of academic disciplinary action while there were only 59 females in this situation. Yet, due to the fact that males do not seek support from the avenues available to them, the male Resident Life staff members on our panel noticed that they subconsciously act differently with their male residents than with their female residents. They felt that men wanted a JC who is a leader and more of a "buddy" instead of a social counselor, a role that many female JCs take on. This is most evident in how first year residents deal with roommate conflict. While our female panelists stated that their residents will come to them with roommate problems instead of confronting their roommate, the male panelists found that if there was a problem in their corridor, the roommates would work it out individually. One of our female panelists gave the example that in one week she had five roommate problems within her corridor, while her male counterparts on the floor above had one reported roommate conflict all year.

Though it is clear that gender disparities exist among higher education institutions at the national level, the causes and effects of these disparities are, as of yet, undefined. When compared with the net male to female ratio of 43% to 57%, noticeable disparities exist across the academic, extracurricular, and athletic spheres at St. Olaf. In terms of curriculum, stereotypical gender splits across educational departments do exist; however, past explanations for these disparities no longer fully represent current trends. When looking at

male and female participation in extracurricular activities, males tend towards opportunities that are leadership oriented while females tend towards a broad range of options where they can use their relational and networking skills. Finally, when dealing with the very environment where students live, we can see that males and females have very different methods of forming friendships with their fellow students. These differences must be recognized and respected so that every student, regardless of gender, can have the best St. Olaf experience possible. In general, even though students don't see the gender disparity at St. Olaf we cannot discredit its importance as a subliminal issue on campus. This issue could have underlying effects that students are not conscious of in their daily activities. While there is no imminent need to act on this issue, the gender disparities in many areas of campus life need to be monitored in order to prevent the balance from tipping too far in one direction; such an occurrence could have a greater effect on campus life in future years.

Conclusion

Gender disparity and gender relations can be complex phenomena, with a myriad of causes and unforeseen consequences. Over the past ten years, St. Olaf has largely reflected national trends in male-female ratios, and this has become apparent in some aspects of students' lives. Although few students explicitly cite gender disparity as an issue on campus, they do recognize its impact. Effects stemming from gender disparity on campus include less-vibrant class discussions, unequal representation of males or females in certain programs, and even different experiences for students in residence halls. As with many issues addressed by the Board of Regents Student Committee, gender disparity poses a long-term question about the identity of both the student body and the college. As members of a college dedicated to a global perspective, diversity, and inclusion of wide perspectives, St. Olaf students and administrators alike should follow gender disparity and gender relations closely.

The subject also demands further study. At times, data about the gender disparity at St. Olaf proved scarce, suggesting that although the subject has provoked increasing discussion nationally, St. Olaf has not yet conducted in-depth institutional research on the issue. As the college continues to grow as a national institution and reevaluates the services it provides to its students, such research is becoming increasingly necessary. Gender disparity and gender relations will figure into the structure of the college's curriculum, fields of study, and extracurricular activities. Thus, BORSC encourages administrators and the Board to consider the impact that adding programs, cutting activities, or changing graduation requirements may have on the respective experiences of males and females at the college.

Because of the complexities of gender disparity and the causes that may lie behind it, it is difficult to endorse a particular route of action for the college. The committee, however, feels that the disparity in study abroad

programs as well as the number of students on academic probation is alarming. In the former, males make up only 36.5% of those who choose to participate in off-campus studies. In the latter, males account for more than 70% of students subject to academic action. Although other areas of disparity, such as those in intramural and intercollegiate athletics, may be concerning, these two areas are central to the mission and identity of the college. The centrality of these two areas lends a great deal of urgency to the gender disparity within them, and BORSC urges all aspects of the college, from the Board of Regents and administrators to students and faculty members, to begin addressing them as soon as possible. Such action is important to address not only gender disparity at the college, but also how St. Olaf can best fulfill its mission and its promise for both males and females.