

Gender Matters in College Choice:



Asking the Right Questions

**National Association for
College Admission Counseling
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What is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)?



Undergraduate student survey that assesses the extent to which students engage in educational practices associated with high levels of learning and development.

www.nsse.iub.edu



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What is the Women's College Coalition?

*The Women's College Coalition
is an association of
women's colleges and universities
whose primary mission
is the education and advancement of
women.*

www.womenscolleges.org

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The New York Times
nytimes.com

March 23, 2006

To All the Girls I've Rejected By JENNIFER DELAHUNTY BRITZ

- Today, two-thirds of colleges and universities report that they get more female than male applicants, and more than 56 percent of undergraduates nationwide are women. Demographers predict that by 2009, only 42 percent of all baccalaureate degrees awarded in the United States will be given to men.
- We have told today's young women that the world is their oyster; the problem is, so many of them believed us that the standards for admission to today's most selective colleges are stiffer for women than men. How's that for an unintended consequence of the women's liberation movement?
- And what messages are we sending young women that they must, nearly 25 years after the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, be even more accomplished than men to gain admission to the nation's top colleges?
- I admire the brilliant successes of our daughters.

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"In what ways do gender issues manifest themselves on campus? What would a truly coeducational institution look like? We call ourselves coeducational, but the experiences of men and women are not equal, and the differences too often translate into disadvantages for women."

Nannerl O. Keohane, President
Duke University, 1993-2004

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“Gender is...one of the most potent forces shaping human institutions, including education”



(Clifford, 1993)

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What Really Matters in College: Student Engagement

The research is unequivocal: students who are actively involved in both academic and out-of-class activities gain more from the college experience than those who are not so involved.

Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini,
How College Affects Students

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Gender Differences in Engagement by First-year Students (source: NSSE 2006)

Female Students More Engaged	Male Students More Engaged
Community service or volunteer work	Tutored or taught other students
Hours per week preparing for class	Hours per week relaxing and socializing (watching TV, partying, etc.)
Hours per week providing care for dependents living with you (parents, children, spouse, etc.)	Hours per week participating in co-curricular activities
Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations	Exercised or participated in physical fitness activities
Used e-mail to communicate with an instructor	Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class
Foreign language coursework	Number of problem sets (problem-based homework assignments) that take less than an hour to complete
Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in	Research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements
Attended an art exhibit, gallery, play, dance, or other theater performance	Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)

Women Students at Coeducational and Women's Colleges: How Do Their Experiences Compare?

Research Design

Sample

NSSE data from 42,112 randomly sampled first-year and senior women at 294 colleges and universities
4,676 women at 26 women's colleges

Between Effects:

Do **women's colleges** differ from **coed institutions** in terms of students' satisfaction, and the nature and frequency of contact with faculty, and activities associated with student learning? and in terms of the degree to which they foreshadow deep learning?

Within Effects:

Do **students at women's colleges** from different backgrounds differ in their experiences?

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Results: Comparing Student Engagement at Women's and Coed Colleges

- **Women at women's colleges more engaged than women at coed colleges**
 - higher Academic Challenge, Seniors more likely to engage in higher order thinking
 - First Years and Seniors higher on active and collaborative learning, and student-faculty interaction, more integrative activities
 - Largest positive difference related to experiences with diversity
- **Mixed perceptions on campus environment**
 - First Years at women's colleges perceived greater support for success
 - Seniors at women's colleges perceived lower level of interpersonal support
- **No difference in satisfaction**

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Results: Comparing Student Engagement at Women's and Coed Colleges, (cont'd)

- Educational Gains higher for women's college first years and seniors
 - understanding self and others
 - general education
 - ability to analyze quantitative problems
 - desire to contribute to welfare of others



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Results: Within Women's Colleges Differences

- Race-ethnic differences
 - African Amer & Asian Pacif. Amer (APA) seniors report fewer interactions with faculty
- Some major field differences; Math & Science majors highest gains in quant skills
- Transfer students at women's colleges as engaged as those who started
- Supportive Campus Climate differences
 - Transfer students perceive support
 - African Amer seniors perceive less support than white women
- Satisfaction
 - African Amer, & APA FY & seniors less satisfied than white women
 - APA seniors and first years differ from white students in engagement
 - Women in social science highest satisfaction, seniors in professional majors less satisfied

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Women's Education: Conclusions

- Results consistent with other studies showing women's college advantage
- Women at women's colleges more engaged, make more progress toward college outcomes
- Women's colleges transfer-friendly
- FY & seniors at women's colleges report challenging academic experiences, more integrative learning
- Support high student-faculty interaction leading to positive educational difference for women
- Conditions encourage FY & seniors to collaborate more with peers, actively participate in class, and integrate ideas
- Foster environment that fuels women's understanding of self and others, working with others; skills associated with career success and leadership
- WCs help women develop quantitative skills and facilitate opportunity to interact around difference

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Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice: Helping Women Find the Best Educational Fit

1. Level of academic challenge
2. Active and collaborative learning
3. Student interactions with faculty members
4. Enriching educational experiences
5. Supportive campus environment

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Helping Women Find the Best Educational Fit

Selecting the right college is a big decision, one of the more important ones a student will make.

Students need to ask many questions when making a college choice. The following prompts have been identified as being particularly germane to women's college choice process.

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1. Level of academic challenge

- In what ways do faculty challenge and support students to leave their "comfort zone" in order to excel?
- How much time do students spend on homework each week?
- To what degree do assignments (papers, exams, problem sets, rehearsals, research projects, etc.) challenge upper-division students to analyze, and synthesize information at high levels?
- In what ways are students given the opportunity to express themselves creatively in assignments?
- How much writing is expected? How much reading is assigned per class? How frequently are students asked to analyze quantitative problems?
- What types of tutors or tutoring opportunities exist on campus?

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2. Active and collaborative learning

- How often are things learned in class discussed outside of the classroom?
- In what ways do students work together on solving problems in and out of class?
- How frequently do students make class presentations?
- How many courses require community-service?
- What types of internships are available and are they required to graduate?

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3. Student interactions with faculty members

- How many students do research with faculty?
- What does the institution do to promote student-faculty contact?
- What kind and how often do students get feedback on coursework?



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4. Enriching educational experiences

- In what ways are students exposed to multiple cultures or diverse perspectives?
- To what extent are students asked to integrate diverse perspectives into assignments?
- Where are students from and how many are from other countries?

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5. Supportive campus environment

- What types of support services (academic and non-academic) are available, particularly for new students?
- To what extent are leadership opportunities available to all students?



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To Consider:

- **If a student indicates that these undergraduate experiences are important to her, she might want to consider attending a women's college.**
- **Women attending women's colleges report higher levels of engagement than women attending co-educational institutions on the types of educational experiences identified in the above questions.**
- **Women students with these values who are interested in attending a co-ed college might use these questions to assess the degree to which these conditions exist in programs or majors at schools in their consideration set.**

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I asked her what one word she would use to describe her college experience?

She thought carefully and then replied confidently, "Challenge." She explained that her women's college experience had challenged and supported her to take risks, had guided her and given her the courage to navigate her way out of her comfort zone, and helped her set higher expectations for herself and achieve greater goals.

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Discussion and Comments

*"Gender...is one of the most potent forces shaping human institutions, including education."
Clifford, 1993*



Women's colleges are a vital postsecondary option for women –

In many respects they are models of effective educational practice

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