



Many Colleges Reject Women at Higher Rates Than for Men

By Alex Kingsbury, Posted 6/17/07

Girls Need Not Apply

Many colleges admit men and women at consistently different rates. Here's a selection of schools where, over the past 10 years, the difference between the male and female admit rate has been especially pronounced.

- 1 Avg. % female on campus
- 2 Avg. female admit gap (% points)

College	1	2
Wheaton College	52	-21
Grove City College	50	-15
University of Richmond	51	-13
Vassar College	61	-12
College of William and Mary	57	-11
Pomona College	49	-9
Conn. College	58	-8
Boston College	53	-8
Georgia State University	61	-7
Providence College	58	-6
University of Texas—Dallas	47	-6
Wake Forest University	51	-6
Stonehill College	57	-6
Illinois Wesleyan University	56	-6
Swarthmore College	53	-6
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey—Newark	58	-5
Skidmore College	59	-5
Fordham University	59	-4

Based on data submitted to U.S. News & World Report.

The University of Richmond, like many small liberal arts colleges, has its roots in single-sex education. The campus, which sits on a picturesque 350 acres of woodland a few miles outside the Virginia state capital, was once two schools: Westhampton and Richmond Colleges, situated on opposite sides of a small lake. The campuses merged around the turn of the 20th century, creating the coed institution that exists today. Despite—and partly because of—its history, the delicate balance between men and women at Richmond has always been a tricky thing to manage.

These days, the student body is 49 percent male and 51 percent female—a ratio that the college insists is determined by the availability of on-campus housing. Maintaining that equilibrium, however, has in the past few years meant rejecting many more female applicants than male ones. In practical terms, in the past decade, female applicants have faced an admissions rate that is an average 13 percentage points lower than that of their male peers just for the sake of keeping that girl-boy balance.

"From a philosophical standpoint, we've really discussed the benefits of keeping it about equal," says Marilyn Hesser, a senior associate director of admissions at Richmond. "The board of trustees has said that the admissions office can go as far as 55-45 [women to men]." Male and female applicants to the school have test scores that are virtually the same, she says. "Was their [male applicants'] high school GPA a little lower? Perhaps."

The University of Richmond is by no means unique in its challenge to keep the number of men and women enrolled roughly equal in the face of a dramatically changing pool of applicants. Nor is it the school where the gap in admissions rates is the most pronounced. Using undergraduate admissions rate data collected from more than 1,400 four-year colleges and universities that participate in the magazine's rankings, *U.S. News* has found that over the past 10 years many schools are maintaining their gender balance by admitting men and women at sometimes drastically different rates.

The schools that are most competitive—Harvard, Duke, and Rice for example—have so many applicants and so many high achievers that they naturally maintain balanced student bodies by skimming the cream of the crop. But in the tier of selective colleges just below them, maintaining gender equity on some campuses appears to require a thumb on the scale in favor of boys. It's at these schools, including Pomona, Boston College, Wesleyan University, Tufts, and the College of William and Mary, that the gap in admit rates is particularly acute.

The reason for these lower admissions rates for female students is simple, if bitterly ironic: From the early grades on up, girls tend to be better students. By the time college admissions come into the picture, many watchers of the "boy gap" agree, it's too late for the lads to catch up on their own. Indeed, beginning in those formative K-12 years, girls watch less television, spend less time playing sports, and are far less likely to find themselves in detention. They are more likely to participate in drama, art, and music classes—extracurriculars that are catnip for admissions officers. Across the board, girls study more, score better, and are less likely to find themselves in special education classes.

Females graduate from high school at a slightly higher rate than men and are more likely to forgo the workforce for an advanced degree. All of these factors help explain why the percentage of women in higher education has been steadily growing: From rough parity in 1980, women made up 57 percent of the 16.6 million American college goers in 2006. By 2010, the Department of Education expects the ratio to be around 60 to 40. In other words, that thumb on the boys' side of the admissions scale will have to press much harder in the coming years to keep those male dormitories at the University of Richmond and other campuses across the country fully populated.

The academic success of women should be good news, especially considering the fact that just a generation ago women were barred from some of the country's best universities: Boston College, Johns Hopkins, the University of Virginia, Brown, Dartmouth, Notre Dame, and Harvard weren't fully coeducational until the 1970s. (Men, meanwhile, were barred from Radcliffe, Barnard, and Smith, among others.) The problem is that while women have made dramatic progress, men have not kept pace and are now increasingly outnumbered in higher education.

At the universities that attract the most applicants, balancing the boy and girl enrollment numbers appears to happen naturally based on the admissions data. At Harvard University, for example, the pool of more than 22,000 applicants has remained equally divided between men and women, meaning that both sexes are admitted at an equal—if dauntingly low—9 percent. Harvard—again, a relative newcomer to coeducation—has seen its percentage of female undergraduates increase steadily over the past decade from 46 percent in 1997 to 49 percent in 2006. Princeton, Stanford, Rice, Duke, and Yale Universities are in the same boat; ditto for the elite liberal arts colleges such as Amherst, Williams, and Middlebury.

Where girls face the biggest challenge is at small liberal arts colleges, like the University of Richmond and Kenyon College in Ohio. An op-ed entitled "To All the Girls I've Rejected," published in the New York Times last year, set the college admissions world atwitter when it outlined the reality of what most officers had been seeing for years. "The fat acceptance envelope is simply more elusive for today's accomplished young women," wrote Jennifer Delahunty Britz, the dean of admissions at Kenyon, which, according to the U.S. News data, is not even among the schools that most heavily favor boys in their admissions process.

An hour's drive east of the University of Richmond, the College of William and Mary also is altering its admissions rates to achieve gender balance, if not parity. In the past decade, the school's portion of women in the undergraduate body has fallen from 60 percent to 54 percent. Overall, because of the rising number of students applying to colleges, the admissions rates for both men and women at William and Mary have plummeted, from 51 percent for men and 43 percent for women in 1997 to 40 and 26 percent in 2006. But over that period, men had an admittance rate 12 percentage points higher than their female counterparts had.

Colleges, meanwhile, contend that their schools are best served by keeping things balanced. "I don't think that's an issue of equity; it's an issue of institutional prerogative [to create] a community that will best serve both the men and the women who elect to be members of that community," says Henry Broaddus, director of admission at William and Mary. "Even women who enroll...expect to see men on campus. It's not the College of Mary and Mary; it's the College of William and Mary."

Indeed, says sophomore Carrie Bruner, it's important to have men on campus in and outside of the classroom.

"Males have perspectives to offer that a woman doesn't have," she says. She also says that she and her female classmates do sometimes joke about a shortage of men to take to dances. And indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that once a campus reaches, say, a 60-to-40 split in favor of either gender, the college becomes less attractive to applicants of both sexes. "Frankly, students care about the dating scene on campus, and no one wants to be outnumbered," says Bari Norman, a former admissions counselor at Barnard College who now runs mycollegecounselor.com.

Some traditionally male-dominated schools are relishing the influx of women. Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., went coed in 1970 and has tried to attract women ever since, a challenge because one of the college's strengths is its engineering program, a discipline in which women have been historically underrepresented. As the school approached and finally reached gender parity in 2000, its applications from both girls and boys soared.

Nationwide, the picture is more nuanced than the William and Mary and Richmond examples. Women are not excluded en masse from higher education. In fact, they do fill the majority of seats there. And since most colleges are "open admission," meaning that they admit all or nearly all qualified applicants, women have a better overall admissions rate than men. "At the national level, are we looking at a system that is excluding capable women from higher education? And the answer to that is clearly no," says Broadus. "Even though there is a lot of focus on the highly selective places, there are still ample higher education opportunities available to qualified students."

It is difficult to gauge how much impact a college's overall desire to maintain a balanced student body has on the decision to accept or reject any particular applicant. Schools are often loath to discuss the specifics of their selection process, and they're especially sensitive when it comes to issues of preferential treatment for one group of students at the expense of another. While the Supreme Court did weigh in on the issue of affirmative action for minority students—endorsing in a 5-to-4 decision the use of race as one of many elements in admissions—it has not directly addressed gender targeting in admissions.

The law in this area is decidedly opaque and sometimes seemingly contradictory. There have been several rulings that largely have focused on race, from which admissions officers and education experts intuit what the law on the use of gender might be. In 2001, a federal appeals court barred the University of Georgia from using gender and race considerations to increase the percentage of black men in its undergraduate freshman class. The courts found that the plaintiffs, three white female students who had been denied admission, had been discriminated against under the Title vi and Title ix statutes requiring race and gender equity. In addition, ballot initiatives underway in several states—and one just passed in Michigan—prevent gender and race from being used in the admissions process. While aimed at ending affirmative action, the language on gender could impact colleges' ability to engineer a gender balance in their entering classes.

"There's no easy answer as to what's legal and what isn't legal," says Marcia Greenberger, copresident of the National Women's Law Center. Even so, the continuing practice of admissions departments is worrying, says Emily Martin, deputy director of the ACLU Women's Rights Project. "It raises questions about punishing girls for their success."

Often lost in the debate is the fact that the gender ratio in higher education has undergone major shifts before. Between 1900 and 1930, for example, men and women were equally represented in higher education, largely because of teaching programs that were dominated by women. That parity ended abruptly after World War II, when the GI Bill

disproportionately benefited males returning from military service. Men continued to be overrepresented until the early 1980s.

What does all of this mean for applicants? For girls, making the cut might come down to something as simple as the expected field of study. As an admissions officer from a small midwestern liberal arts college puts it: "God help the female English majors who apply to this school." In fact, women hoping to study engineering will find themselves at an advantage at schools like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which over the past decade has admitted women at a rate that is 17 percentage points higher than for men.

Some colleges, like Lake Erie College in Ohio and Husson College in Maine, are making extra efforts to attract male applicants by creating football teams. Others are emphasizing hands-on learning on college tours, tweaking their advertising brochures, and reaching out to all-male high schools. Common recruiting practices like writing personalized notes or having alumni call interested students are not as effective at landing students with a Y chromosome, schools have found.

Male applicants are often in an advantaged position—so much so that college counselors have begun advising some boys to "emphasize their maleness," says Steve Goodman, a longtime independent college counselor. He encourages male students to submit pictures or trumpet their sports activities. "Anything to catch an admissions officer's eye."

In the end, targeting applications to schools with historically better admit rates for either gender is a Heisenbergian exercise, where the previous year's data will influence the next year's applicant pool in unknown ways.

"Students have very little control over admission in general, and their gender is something that they have no control over," says Connecticut-based independent counselor Janet Rosier. "Worrying about this aspect of an already secretive process will only cause kids more stress."

Sitting in the admissions office at the University of Richmond, Marilyn Hesser agrees. Students, she says, need to follow their hearts in finding the best place for them to live and study. Chasing numbers can be problematic. "We could do more to get applications from men," she says, "but that would also result in more applications from women."