

Gender Matters

Libby V. Morris

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In higher education, gender and race are realities and issues that are contested, ignored, rationalized, and sometimes debated. Do you remember economist Lawrence H. Summers and the firestorm he created while serving as the President of Harvard when he suggested that women's ability to perform in the sciences might be related in part to a different (lesser?) aptitude than men? He questioned the extent to which discrimination and socialization created the male-female divide in math and science. President Summers' defense, as reported in the popular press, was that he was speaking from the research of others and being provocative. Shortly thereafter, in 2006, he resigned following a no-confidence vote by the faculty.

Words can trip us; what we mean may not be the same as what we say. We may be clumsy and anxious when discussing valued-laden, sensitive topics. Thus, we tend to avoid these topics; or we pretend that race and gender do not matter, that we are fair, and that *truly* the best person wins!

The issue of gender in the academy was made highly visible to me recently when I served on an editors' panel at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Eight journals dealing with important topics in post-secondary education were featured. To my surprise, seven of the editors were men (see p. 46, <http://www.ashe.ws/images/2012%20ASHE%20PROGRAM.pdf>.) Of course, no one planned it this way. It just "happened" that men serve as the editors of these journals. I don't believe there is a grand plan to deny women this role and responsibility. Interestingly, an audience member told stories of rejected manuscripts and raised the issue of how "other voices" and epistemologies might gain access to these journals. This challenge was met with audience applause. I believe that some of my editor colleagues were a bit shocked by this statement. This begs the question of how knowledge is created, valued, and disseminated. Does gender play a role? I will leave that discussion for another day.

I guess I have not given a lot of time to considering gender inequities; psychologically and motivationally it is important to believe that hard work will pay off while acknowledging that social and cultural capital are important to success, i.e., it helps to have educated parents and a firm financial and stable home-life as a foundation. The striking gender imbalance in the panel, however, made me start thinking more about gender in the academy, so I decided to do a little counting. You might enjoy doing the same on your campus or more broadly.

L. V. Morris (✉)

Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia, 102 Meigs Hall, Athens, GA 30602-6772, USA
e-mail: lvmorris@uga.edu

In college admissions and educational attainment, women have reached parity overall and now receive the majority of degrees at every level from associate through doctoral degrees (see the *Almanac of Higher Education*, 2012). All degrees, however, are not the same. Admission practices vary considerably across types of institutions, from highly selective to open admissions; and some institutions like the Georgia Institute of Technology, a public research AAU institution, continue to enroll two men for every woman at the undergraduate level and 3:1 at the graduate level.

Within colleges, gender segregation by field is readily apparent; and many of the most low-paying fields of study are dominated by women: in 2009–10, women earned more than 80% of the baccalaureate degrees in education, family and consumer sciences, health professions, library science, and public administration/social-service professions. Several other large areas, e.g., language and literature, foreign languages, communication/journalism, liberal arts/humanities, awarded more than 65% of the degrees to women. In contrast, the female share of degrees in computer and information sciences and in engineering was only 18% in each. Gender matters in disciplinary and professional choices. We should ask if it is student interest and ability or disciplinary norms, practices, and mentoring that affect student choice of major and persistence.

In areas of employment, we are often caught in the balance between the affirmative action practice of “throwing the net wide” to find qualified and diverse applicants, followed by applying “race blind” or “gender blind” criteria to hire the best candidate. What can be said, however, of criteria if they emerge from a highly homogenous subset of the total population? What can be said or expected from a 21-member Presidential Search Committee for the next President of the University of Georgia that only has 3 women members (<http://presidentialsearch.uga.edu/committee.html>)? I know more than half of the search committee members, and they are highly qualified individuals deeply committed to the University of Georgia. The list of finalists will be sent to the Board of Regents, where one woman serves on that 18-member committee. Regents are appointed by the Governor, on staggered terms, crossing gubernatorial terms. The Board members are a hard-working group, dedicated to higher education in Georgia; and for some reason apparently few women have met the criteria for appointment.

I could go on about selection and hiring and appointment, but the space is too limited here. I guess we could say that there is intentional discrimination or that women just do not turn out to be the “best choice” in many of these situations. Surely, however, there is no planned discrimination or planned bias; the women were great, but they just fell a “little short” of meeting the criteria (whatever those were). Importantly, those who control the criteria control the outcome. As in editing, or in governing, or in selecting, in the high stakes games of higher education it is important to be at the table.

I don’t really have time in this short piece, but I will quickly say that salaries are another interesting topic *vis-à-vis* gender. Again according to the *Almanac* (2012), on average women faculty members only make four-fifths as much as men.

Lest you think I am some disgruntled, angry female, (my apologist statement for even bringing this up), I have a wonderful husband, two grown, well-educated sons, and a darling two year old grandson. And, I have had many successes in the academy! But, *gender matters*, and it is time that we all step up and say so – again. Globally, we face tremendous challenges in health care, poverty, violence, and environmental conditions. I believe the outcomes will be better for individuals, communities, and global populations if we can get more perspectives and broader criteria. To do so we must bring all voices to the table. We must teach our undergraduates and graduate students how to discuss highly charged topics—race, gender, environment, politics— with self-reflection, “facts,” and tolerance.