

Why Do Women Have a Growing Advantage in College Success?

The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools, by Thomas A. Diprete and Claudia Buchmann. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013.

Reviewed by Emilie Yonan

Last April, *The New York Times* drew lots of attention with its report that elite colleges now turn down over nine out of ten applicants.¹ Stanford University, the West Coast “Ivy”, has the lowest acceptance rate at just 5%. Less noticed in the *Times* report was the fact that over the past 7 years there has been a widening gap in the admission rates of men and women. This comes as no major surprise for many of my generation. For the past 6 years, I have been associated with a college counseling company that specializes in getting students accepted into universities at a time when college acceptance has become increasingly difficult. During my high school years, I was a client of this company and utilized as much of their service as I could. I was applying to college as an economics major, something that I hoped might make me stand out. In one of my sessions with my college counselor, Billy, I remember him discussing what he called “reverse” gender discrimination that was growing in higher education institutions. He told me upfront that the only chance I had in getting into a top academic institution would be to apply in economics because that area had not been saturated by women yet.

My decision on which schools to apply to was made in 2010, three years before publication of *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools*. Authors Thomas A. Diprete and Claudia Buchmann provide much-needed and solid analysis of gender differentials in the American educational system today. Diprete and Buchmann are sociology professors at Columbia University and Ohio State University, respectively, and have written widely on these subjects in the past. However, what really kicked off their interest was anecdotal evidence of the gender gap both experienced as parents, as well as Buchmann’s personal issues with gender discrimination in the professions. It is this foundation for their questions that allows them to look at the gender gap as a whole process versus just the end result of a degree attained. In fact, in the “Preface”, the authors note that when they began on a personal level questioning the differences in academic engagement and success between the genders, they mostly found “aspects in which women trailed men, such as gender segregation in majors ... studies that did acknowledge women’s higher rates of educational attainment

... treated these facts as anomalies or disregarded them as irrelevant (xvi).” In 2006, Buchmann and Diprete published a paper aimed at a realigned focus: “The Growing Female Advantage in College Completion: The Role of Family Background and Academic Achievement”². This piece is largely integrated into Chapter 6 of their new book.

The book differs from many studies because it is a holistic look at the gender gap in education. They acknowledge at the outset the current situation of higher education and degrees but emphasize that they are really interested in “the shortfall in male educational attainment” today (9). This is far less a study into gender identity than a search for “greater insight into the reasons for the male shortfall [that] can help develop policies that improve educational outcomes for both girls and boys (19).” This motivation keeps the book focused so that the authors do not try to reach too many disparate conclusions. The book separates changes in the school systems at the pre-college and post-secondary levels from their analysis of the entire function of the education system and the relevant social and behavioral factors.

This helps make the later chapters of this book stand out from much of the existing literature. For instance, Chapter 6 focuses on families’ influence on the gender gap. They cite studies that found “parents treat their young sons differently from their young daughters in ways that affect child development” and “that parents give more independence to boys and exert more social controls over girls (126).” One of the most valuable conclusions of the book in terms of the effect of early and family life on educational success and aspiration is that the education level and presence of a father plays a large role in “closing the academic gap between boys and girls (140).” Even so, the fact that most boys idolize fantasy superheroes and athletes, people and characters that achieve their goals without using education, has a large impact on the engagement of males in the classroom (141). Young males, as they found, are often drawn into the traditional masculine definitions from the past that put great focus on sports, physical prowess, and power. Girls, on the other hand, often have more of a connection with “high-culture activities” like music, dance and other arts-related

interests. Based on data from the National Center for Educational Statistics’ survey of eighth-graders’ views on the importance of good grades, they found that not only does the presence of a father with a college degree matter, but that students with a present father with a college degree and activities in high-culture areas cared more about their grades (145). This is probably their most interesting and distinctive section of the book. The fact that they really examine the differences in how children are treated in academic and overall social settings gives their conclusions much more weight and power than some past overstatements of innate gender gaps.

Part III of the text zooms out of the micro studies and insights that make Part II so engaging. The role of the school and its impact on the academic engagement and success of the two genders is analyzed here. They look into the different criteria on which students are graded and evaluated and discuss the difference between these. They note that “Harvard, Princeton, and Yale modified their admissions criteria early in the twentieth century to favor ‘well-rounded’ applicants (163). They address how the decision of college major changes the gender dynamic in higher education. They resist just discussing the same facts repeated in almost every article on to the subject and focus on the concept of a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) “pipeline” that begins in high school and funnels people into these majors (192). They found that even though girls are in this “pipeline” throughout high school, many leave this to pursue non-STEM related majors (192). While this section provided some minor insight into classroom dynamics and brought the conversation back to higher education, it definitely was not as interesting or packed with under-the-radar information as Part II.

Unfortunately, Buchmann and Diprete’s Part I was the weakest section of the whole book. While it has their own research findings infused into certain areas that are missing from most books on schooling, their discussion on higher education seems run-of-the-mill. They cite factors such as “Access to reliable contraception”, “rising rates of college entry”, and “gender segregation in education-business-other majors [diminishing]” as sources of change in the amount of women obtaining higher education degrees (61, 51, 44). These are not new events or changes to consider when analyzing the gender gap in a more in depth way. Maybe they were used as a basis for readers or to easily introduce the audience to statistics they may not be aware of. However, to people that have some minor background in this area, it is difficult not to flip through and skip the pages. One interesting aspect of the gender gap that was included in this section was the mention that men and women tend to be separated into different occupations and since men have a “greater tendency ... to work in manufacturing and construction”, this is “a reason why women have generally fared better in the ‘Great Recession’ (59).” This was a topic that has been floating around since the 2008-09 recession and is an important output of the gender gap to think about. However, besides this, the section does not offer any real interesting or new analysis from their other research.

In the last chapter of the book, Diprete and Buchmann do not provide explicit solutions to the problems of males in education but instead offer changes that can be made to move towards pinching the gender gap. They discredit Edward M. Morris’s book, *Learning the Hard Way: Masculinity, Place and the Gender Gap in Education*, explaining that the focus on working-class children being less engaged in school in this book has been entirely contradicted by the success of girls from this same situation (209). Thus, from all the research done for the book, they find a huge issue in getting and keeping students motivated in the classroom. With the motivation problem identified, they believe that better “visibility” of routes to college and education about the labor market could give students, especially boys, information about how their success today helps them in the future (207). This education might help males develop the skills and tools for their future as well as keep them engaged in school to achieve their dreams.

Throughout *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools*, Thomas Diprete and Claudia Buchmann have tried to figure out the reasons behind educational gender gaps not only in higher education, but all the way from students’ initial involvement with the education system. Many of their conclusions hint at an underlying cultural problem with males and education even though they never say it explicitly. However, a sentence on the second to last page of the book seems revealing about their implicit beliefs: “Today’s girls also connect a feminine identity with a career and see college and advanced degrees as the route to a better career” (211). I think this really captures the essence of what Diprete and Buchmann were trying to find from this book: how can our culture be changed to get males up to the same levels of academic success and engagement as females? Their book is a valuable starting point for a more in-depth examination of the education system.

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NOTES:

- ¹ Pérez-Peña, Richard. “Best, Brightest and Rejected: Elite Colleges Turn Away Up to 95%.” *The New York Times* (4/8/2014).
- ² T. Diprete and C. Buchmann, “The Growing Female Advantage in College Completion: The Role of Family Background and Academic Achievement,” *American Sociological Review* (August 2006) vol. 71 no. 4: 515-541