

Gender Imbalance

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As I entered the classroom on the first day of this fall semester, I quickly noticed that female students outnumbered male students. This is not a new observation. During the past several years, I have had more female students in any of my classes, and most college teachers have noticed the same trends for years now. This shrinking sex ratio is more apparent at higher levels. In some of the graduate classes that I taught during the past five years, there were as many as 95 percent female students and some of my colleagues actually had classes with 100 percent female students.

At Auburn University Montgomery, some of the most recent enrollment figures show that 66 percent of students were females, with males accounting for only 34 percent. AUM students' gender composition is similar to that of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, with 63 percent females and 37 percent males. Troy University also registered a gender imbalanced enrollment in 2005 with 57 percent females and 43 percent males.

One rare exception is Auburn University's main campus, where we still observe nearly a 50-50 male-female enrollment as of fall 2006. The AU case is atypical and results in part from the higher number of fields of studies that are still male-dominated. Again, overall, the percentage of male enrollment is shrinking across Alabama, while female enrollment is on the rise.

This is an occasion for celebration, given centuries of gender exclusion during most of human history. We must recall that until recently, education was male territory and even when women were allowed to attend schools, many were geared toward fields that were close to domestic tasks. So female education in the past several decades was to help women obtain skills to perform or improve their tasks as housekeepers and caregivers.

Today, we are enjoying more and more gender equality in educational systems and women have proven very competent and sometime more skilled than men. On the other hand, men's school enrollment and educational attainment is on the decline.

What are the causes of this shrinking male education? Demographers have consistently shown that under normal conditions and in every society, there are usually more male babies born than female babies. In the United States where medical conditions have resulted in substantial reduction in infant mortality (the number of children who die before their first birthday), the sex ratio at birth remains about the same for babies born during the same period.

Current sex ratio estimates are in the neighborhood of 105-106 baby boys per 100 baby girls for the United States. In Alabama there are about 105 baby boys per 100 baby girls. The city of Montgomery has a sex ratio of 105 baby boys per 100 baby girls. There are some noticeable sex ratio differences by race, with whites having slightly a higher proportion of male births as compared to African Americans.

Researchers now acknowledge that such racial disparities in sex ratio are partly due to many complex factors, including age (especially mother's age) at birth and socio-economic status, things that affect the timing and frequency of sexual intercourse.

Today, one wonders if some parents don't deliberately control the sex of their offspring. With so much advancement in bio-medical engineering people may challenge the natural demographic order, but we are not there yet, at least for the United States.

So what is really happening to baby boys that lead to such an imbalance in sex ratio in college enrollment? There are many forces at play. As a demographer, I can't ignore the effect of sex differences in mortality. Human males are more exposed to conditions that are conducive to higher risk of dying, situations that help explain the sharp decrease in proportion of males to females at older ages. And among minorities, especially African Americans, high homicide and incarceration rates limit further the chance of schooling for young men.

Women are not only outnumbering men, they also perform better in many instances. Recent data from the Census Bureau reveal substantial gender differences in educational attainment or the level of schooling. For example, nearly 9 percent of Alabama females aged 18-24 years had bachelor's degrees compared to only 5 percent of males in that age group. The same pattern is observed in the city of Montgomery where about 10 percent of females aged 18-24 years have bachelors' degree or higher whereas only about 6 percent of males have such level of education.

Such trends are more likely to continue in the foreseeable future. These changes are associated with a host of unintended demographic consequences. Imagine what will happen in terms of marriage and family formation. In a society like ours where women still marry up in terms of age, wealth, education and occupation, increased female education can introduce challenges for those who do not understand the current educational opportunity for women.

Today, men and women must accept to renegotiate family and household management strategies that are suitable to the 21st century. The old division of labor must be changed to new ways of life where both men and women play essential roles in the family, workplace and society at large. In the meantime, parents should send both boys and girls to school and encourage them to excel so we can continue to celebrate gender equality in academia and the workplace.

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