

# Gender related attitudes toward achievement in college

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*Reports that lower income males constitute a population of at-risk students in higher education prompted a survey of male and female community college students (N = 314) on a number of variables believed to be relevant to college achievement. While both males and females expressed strong support for the value of college education (98% and 99% respectively), females gave significantly stronger endorsement for the value of reading and writing. The majority of males evidenced strong support for academic related activities, did not view academic duties as feminine (but rather as masculine), showed little desire to abandon college for alternatives such as high paying blue collar employment, and did not endorse the idea that college success constituted a betrayal of one's roots.*

## Introduction

In recent years, the question of whether male college students constitute a population at academic risk has been debated in both the popular media and scholarly publications. Those that contend that males have become academically disadvantaged (e.g., Brendan, 1999; Evelyn, 2002; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Kleinfeld, 1998; Mortenson, 1999; Pollack, 1999; Sommers, 2000) cite enrollment data, GPA distributions, graduation rates, disciplinary records, and other academic criteria to suggest that male students as a group substantially underperform relative to their female counterparts. More recently, a series of reports authored by Jacqueline King of the American Council on Education (King 2000, 2003, 2006) and a report from the American

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Association of University Women (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008) argue that the observed gender-based deficit is not pervasive, and that it pales in comparison to that attributable to socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

In her initial analysis of Department of Education and U.S. Census Bureau data, King noted that the gender achievement gap is localized among lower income and minority populations, citing that “in particular, African-American, Hispanic, and lower-income males lag behind their female peers in terms of educational attainment and are far outpaced by white, Asian-American, and middle-class men and women” (King, 2000, p. 2). By 2006, with the benefit of an additional 6 years of trend-tracking, King acknowledged that the achievement gap was indeed widening among lower-income whites and lower- and middle-income Hispanic traditional-age undergraduates (age 24 or younger), further noting that among students age 25 or older, women outnumber men by almost a two to one margin (King 2006).

The demographic groups that King identifies as most vulnerable to gender disparities in higher education are those most directly served by community colleges. For example, while women comprise 56% of all college students, their enrollment proportion is

fully 60% at the community college level; across all levels of higher education, women are not expected to reach 60% of enrollment until 2016 (American Association of Community Colleges, available <http://www2.aacc.nche.edu/research/index.htm>; Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2008). A similar asymmetry can be found in projections of conferred degrees. Women are projected to receive 58% of bachelors degrees and 63% of all associate degrees in 2008. In the projection for 2016, women are expected to claim 60% of bachelors degrees and 64% of associate degrees.

The underlying causes for the gender divide have been notoriously difficult to pin down. The most frequently cited reasons point to some mixture of economic, sociological, and psychological influences. On the economic front, males might simply be responding to a perception of market realities, unwilling to forgo immediate wage earning potential for a less certain advantage in the future conferred by a college degree (King, 2006; Sommers, 2000). Sociological and psychological reasons center around the point that males may tend to find the relatively passive nature of academic life to be emasculating, feminine, or “uncool” (e.g., Evelyn, 2002; Lewin, 2006; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005; Sommers, 2000).

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Given these considerations and the fact that the gender divide is especially represented within populations that tend to be served by community colleges, the current research sought to explore gender based attitudes towards academic achievement in a sample of community college students. The intent was to tap into some of the variables that previous research or conjecture would consider most relevant to gender based attitudinal divisions: variables such as the value assigned to college education; the values assigned to reading and writing; whether college involvement is perceived to be “uncool,” masculine, feminine, or preferable to work; whether college achievement is thought to be something to be hidden from friends; or whether it constitutes a betrayal of one’s roots.

## Method

### Participants

The participating community college students were solicited on a volunteer basis from the classes of cooperating faculty at Kingsborough Community College, with full approval of the local IRB committee. There were a total of 314 respondents; 210 females and 104 males (enrollment at the college is currently 60% female). Average age of the respondents was 22.05 years ( $SD = 5.85$ ); 74% of males re-

ported working ( $M = 20.64$  hours worked,  $SD = 15.72$ ) versus 65% of females ( $M = 16.93$  hours worked,  $SD = 15.17$ ). Males reported a mean of .26 dependent children, females a mean of .47 dependent children. The majority of students (males = 58%; females = 63%) reported total family income below \$49,000. The following percentages indicate ethnic groups among the participants: African-American, 24%; South Asian, 2.9%; Central Asian, 3.7%; Asian Pacific, 6.2%; Caribbean, 11%; European-American, 23.75%, Latino, 14.2%; Middle Eastern, 3.9%; Other, 9.6%. The respondents were primarily first year students.

### Materials

The researchers distributed a survey in hard copy form consisting of 42 questions to male and female students in the middle of spring semester 2008. The participants completed the survey through conventional paper and pencil response. The majority of survey items were structured as Likert rating scales with values ranging from 1 to 10, with low values representing low endorsement and high values representing high endorsement of the item. The items were designed by the author with the intention of measuring, as directly as possible, student attitudes towards the value of college achievement. For the purpose of analysis, blocks of related items were combined to

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form index variables. For example, the items “How important is it for you to do well in college?”, and “How important is it for you to get your degree?”, and “College education is the key to my future” were combined into one index variable designed to assess the subjective valuation of college involvement. Similarly, the items “How cool is it to do well in college?”, “How cool is it to attend classes?”, and “How cool is it to learn new things in college?” were combined to assess the subjective “coolness” valuation of college involvement. Additional index variables were configured to assess the subjective evaluation of reading and writing separately, the attribution of femininity and masculinity to college involvement, and the social acceptability of college involvement to family and friends. Two forms of the surveys were employed, counterbalancing the masculinity/femininity questions to avoid order effects.

## Results

For the testing of differences between male and female responses on key index variables, rating data for the groups was subjected to independent *t*-tests. All of the comparisons, with the exception of one (“college is masculine”), showed significant differences, albeit in many cases with small effect sizes. For example, the small difference in group means of

9.26 (males) and 9.65 (females) on the “college is valuable” index variable proved to be significant,  $t(310) = -3.68, p < .05$ , but Cohen’s *d* reveals the effect size of the difference ( $d = .39$ ) to be small. Similarly, the significant differences for the “college is cool” ( $d = .37$ ), “prefers college over working” ( $d = .30$ ), “I am highly motivated” ( $d = .37$ ), and “prefers to drive a truck or work construction over college” ( $d = .34$ ) index variables bear small effect sizes. Obtained significant differences for other variables showed substantially larger effect sizes; “reading is valuable and enjoyable”, ( $d = 6.03$ ), “writing is valuable and enjoyable” ( $d = 5.84$ ), “cool to be good in math” ( $d = 3.39$ ), and “betraying one’s roots” ( $d = 3.58$ ). Table 1 displays the relevant significance data for the measured index variables.

The data was also analyzed to demonstrate the strength of endorsement of the questionnaire items as a function of gender. Table 2 displays the breakdown of the response percentages for the same items represented in Table 1. The category labeled “low endorsement” combines ratings ranging from 1 to 4 for each item, the category “mid endorsement” combines ratings 5 and 6, and the category labeled “high endorsement” combines ratings ranging from 7 to 10 on each item.

**Table 1. *t*-test results on index variables**

Item	Means		<i>t</i> (df)	Cohen's <i>d</i> (effect size)
	Males	Female		
College is valuable	9.26	9.65	-3.68 (310)*	.39
Reading is valuable and enjoyable	6.44	7.39	-4.15 (308)*	6.03
Writing is valuable and enjoyable	6.48	7.39	-4.02 (308)*	5.84
College is cool	8.67	9.15	-3.05 (308)*	.37
Cool to be good in math	7.25	7.93	-2.32 (310)*	3.39
College is masculine	6.34	5.94	.97 (287)	1.44
College is feminine	4.17	7.18	-8.01 (303)*	.98
Prefers college over working	8.6	9.02	-2.43 (312)*	.30
Feels ashamed about college	3.57	2.85	3.39 (307)*	.41
I am highly motivated	7.91	8.53	-3.05 (312)*	.37
Betraying one's roots by going to college	2.21	1.62	2.50 (307)*	3.58
Prefers driving a truck or construction to college	3.52	2.62	2.85 (312)*	.34

\* significant at .05 level

## Discussion

When analyzed by *t*-test, the data seems to present a stark contrast between male and female response patterns in that 11 of 12 comparisons show significant differences (see Table 1). This impression is qualified by the fact that the effect sizes of five of these differences, as

calculated by Cohen's *d* (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1996), are small. Large, or even very large effects do appear for several other items, notably those that measured the perceived value of reading and writing, that it is "cool" to be good in math, and the perception that going to college is "betraying one's

**Table 2. Gender related attitudes towards college involvement**

Item	Low <sup>1</sup>		Mid <sup>2</sup>		High <sup>3</sup>	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
College is valuable	1	0	0	2	99	98
Reading is valuable and enjoyable	14	11	31	21	55	68
Writing is valuable and enjoyable	4	02	26	12	70	85
College is cool	0	04	12	1	88	94
Cool to be good in math	17	07	16	13	68	79
College is masculine	26	29	15	24	59	48
College is feminine	52	15	21	20	27	65
Prefers college over working	0	1.5	12	4	88	94.5
Feels ashamed about college	68	81	25	17	7	2
I am highly motivated	3	3	14	6	83	91
Betraying one's roots by going to college	87	93	3	3	10	4
Prefer driving a truck or construction job	63	80	23	5	13	14

<sup>1</sup>Low endorsement category consists of scale responses of 1-4.

<sup>2</sup>Mid endorsement consists of responses of 5 and 6

<sup>3</sup>High endorsement consists of responses 7-10.

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

roots.” In these items, females as a group provided significantly higher subjective valuations for reading and writing, a finding in line with a number of studies that provide evidence for female superiority in these competencies (see Halpern, 2000). Females also reported significantly higher endorsement for the belief that it is “cool” to be good in math, a finding that runs counter to the stereotype of weak-

er performance on standardized math tests relative to males (e.g., Halpern, 2000; King, 2006; Sommers, 2000). Thus females provided significantly higher subjective valuations (with large effect sizes) for the three items in the survey which most directly apply to the core of academic work: reading, writing, and math.

A significant difference with

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a large effect size was also found for the “college is feminine” item; females tend to view college work as feminine more than do males (no group difference was found on the parallel “college is masculine” item). Males were significantly more likely (with large effect size) to express the belief that going to college is “betraying one’s roots.”

An examination of the data parsed by percentage of endorsement for each item (see Table 2), provides some context for the findings reported above. For example, the first variable, “College education is valuable,” which indexed the items *How important is it for you to do well in college?*, and *How important is it for you to get your degree?*, and *College education is the key to my future*, shows near unanimous high endorsement by both males and females (99% and 98% respectively) despite the finding of a significant difference. The seeming contradiction here, and for other items, can be explained by contribution of small within-group variances compared to the overall *N* and the between group differences, as indexed by the small effect size. The remainder of the variables reveal similar nuances to be found in the data.

Other items reveal similar tendencies. For example, on the “college is masculine” variable, a majority of 59% of the males highly endorsed the idea that college is

masculine, while only 48% of the females did. The difference was not significant, however, owing largely to the relatively high within-group variance. The value of the percentage data presented in Table 2 can be seen in examples such as the following: despite the lack of a significant difference, it is clear from the data that the majority of the male respondents view college involvement as a masculine, not feminine, activity. Similarly, while the males were found to be significantly more likely to view college as “betraying one’s roots,” the percentage data reveals that only 10% of the males gave a strong endorsement to this viewpoint, the overwhelming majority (87%) providing low endorsement.

## Conclusion

The present study was prompted by recent high profile research that documents academic vulnerabilities in lower income male college students that maintain across ethnic boundaries (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008; King, 2006). The author’s intention was to explore some of the underlying attitudinal variables that might account for a presumed disaffection by male students, such as a preference for paid work over study and a perception that success in college amounts to a “betrayal of one’s roots” (e.g., Evelyn, 2002; Lewin, 2006; Martino & Pallotta-Chiar

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olli, 2003, 2005; Sommers, 2000). The results of the study offer only qualified support for the view that males have become academically disaffected. The majority of both males and females overwhelmingly expressed strong support for the value of a college education, and the majority of both male and female students stated a preference for college over working in place of college. Only a minority of students (male and female) expressed shame about attending college or felt they were “betraying their roots” by doing so. On the other hand, evidence that males may be less firmly engaged in academic work can also be found. While a majority of males and females endorsed the notion that “college is cool,” females as a group were significantly more likely to take this view, and to agree that it is also “cool” to be good in math.

Males, as a group, did not perceive college involvement to be a feminine activity—in fact, the majority of males assessed it to be a masculine activity (and the majority of females assessed it to be a feminine activity); thus neither

group seemed to view the activities of college life to be intrinsic to the opposite sex. Neither males nor females indicated strong support for the idea that having a high paying blue collar job (such as driving a truck or doing construction) would be preferable to staying in college.

This study was conducted in an urban community college, with the rationale that community colleges most directly serve the lower income student populations that have been shown to exhibit gender disparities in achievement in higher education. The mixture of results obtained by the study speak to the complexity of the issue and offer hope that males already within the community college environment tend to recognize the importance and lasting value of their college education. The situation may be very different for the population of males who remain outside of college enrollment.



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