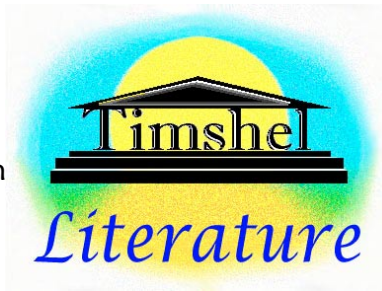


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Just Thinking, 05/05/03:

Keepin' the Boys in the Game

by Justin Katz

Apparently, the American campus now has four female students for every three males. Among black students, it's two to one. Such statistics incite various reactions, usually along broad ideological lines. In one direction are surely men, although they've learned to keep their thoughts to themselves, who feel a pang of resentment for their subordinated gender. In the other direction are feminists who dismiss such findings with a strange combination of just-rewards scoffing and the implication that it is, somehow, little more than further proof that women are oppressed.

In between the extremes are people who believe that gender parity ought to exist naturally in a fair system. This group – incorporating a surprising number of women, itself – cites specific policies and trends that might make the disparity as broad as it is. Perhaps the most egregious culprit, in this view, is the “feminization” of education. In a cultural sense, the foundation for this claim is obvious. Traditional teaching methods developed in a system without the modern degree of institutionalized development of abstract pedagogical theories. Concurrently, classrooms were dominated by boys. Consequently, methods of teaching that proved effective were specifically those that worked for those boys. With a “new paradigm,” one of decreased competition and less-concrete teaching methods, the paradigm to which boys had long responded shifted.

In their article “Mysterious Decline-Where Are the Men on Campus,” Philip W. Cook and Glenn Sacks suggest that, at the university itself, similar trends in thinking manifest in ways that are much more explicitly hostile to young men. Directly, the perversion of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act to mandate numerical parity in collegiate sports has led to the termination of hundreds of male athletic teams and the displacement of thousands of male athlete-students. Indirectly, the authors argue, an extreme feminism, as seen in condensed form in Women’s Studies programs, has perpetuated discredited ideas and statistics and generally fostered an anti-male environment.

Those feminists might, like Barbara Ehrenreich, suggest that women feel more of a need to enter college because men “still have such an advantage over women in the non-professional workforce that they don’t require an education.” Beneath the radical spin is the valid point that young men are more likely to see blue-collar work as a viable option. Of course, with initiatives to pull women into traditionally male occupations in the public sector, such as the military and firefighting, as well as gender-related requirements and incentives for public contractors, those very feminists are working to diminish that “equalizing” advantage.

The blue-collar “option” also doesn’t take into account that most such workers will hit a relatively low ceiling if they don’t pursue further education. Without connections, and usually without employers’ financial or time-related support for advanced training, workers without college degrees are likely to see positions above them filled with external hires. The fact that this is especially true for those toward the lower ranges of the economic scale points to another reason that the blue-collar aspect actually further justifies concern about the larger trend.

For those with lower-class backgrounds, education is most significant as a means of economic and social advancement. As the less-favorable-to-men ratio for blacks indicates, the level of disparity increases among the groups that require the most help with social mobility. It would

not seem unreasonable to suggest that this group is also the most affected by the “feminized” paradigm of public education, the dismantling of men’s athletics, and any perceived hostility toward men on campus. In short, giving full consideration to the objections generates only further reasons for concern that the end result will be an underclass of less-educated men.

Cook and Sacks’s suggested actions — “boy-friendly reforms” — all, in essence, involve allowing males and females to be different when they are, in fact, different. Most obviously, this would mean allowing college men to play sports even if a proportional number of women are not interested in a corresponding pursuit. It is also the underlying objective to seeking teachers who harbor “a good-natured acceptance of boyish energy.” However, the reforms also arbitrarily restrict the changes to the educational system as it currently stands.

It might prove more effective and efficient for society to rethink its definition of “higher education.” Extending the allowance of difference beyond traditional conceptions of “skilled labor” versus “advanced degrees” would not only increase the numbers of young men following through with their education beyond high school, but would also make the entire system of education, itself, more versatile. For men and women.

From one direction, such a strategy would entail inserting a liberal arts component to vocational programs. Perhaps initially, this could take the form of career-specific application of writing, but open electives might serve to open new areas of interest right from the start. From the other direction, a probable hurdle of snobbery would have to be overcome in order to increase — most likely, develop — craft-related departments and areas of study in traditional universities.

An organized work/study arrangement might be particularly helpful and beneficial for such a purpose. In this way, college can align with the “more viable” career options that men, particularly lower-class men, consider. The implications of such an approach can only become

more advantageous in the future, considering that significant portions of the high-tech and IT markets are developing along the same lines – and among the same demographics – as trades.

Moreover, such a shift in higher education would help to dissolve unnecessary, unjustified barriers. The laborer who knows his place of employment from the ground up will have a parallel path to follow to advance into positions that might otherwise go to somebody who is “wet behind the ears,” but holding a degree. In a social sense, addressing gender differences and relations, the unnecessary barriers might be even more in need of destruction.

In addressing the issue of the “gender gap” in higher education, Canadian journalist Lysiane Gagnon imagined a scene around a dance floor, with “high-paid, ambitious, professional women” on one side and “uneducated men stuck in small, low-paying jobs” on the other. She calls the men “a large group of losers.” Men are not losers, and even careers that don’t require a bachelor’s degree bestow the title of Professional.