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Faculty Gender and Student Performance ^[1]

Submitted by [Elia Powers](#) ^[2] on June 21, 2007 - 4:00am

The conversation about gender and academic performance typically focuses on the composition of male and female students in a given course. But what about who's teaching?

A study at the University of Toronto finds that a student's performance and interest in a given subject are not affected much by the professor's gender. The working paper, "[A Professor Like Me: The Influence of Instructor Gender on College Achievement](#) ^[3]," released through the National Bureau of Economic Research (and available with an NBER subscription or a \$5 payment), explains that the conclusion holds true when considering students of different ethnicities, pre-college abilities and academic interests.

The report looks at data from more than 34,000 students in some of the largest first-year courses at Toronto between 1996 and 2005. It considers students' grades, whether they dropped a given course and how the course might have influenced future class decisions -- as in, did a student follow up an introductory economics course by then taking several more?

One of the paper's co-authors, Philip Oreopoulos, who teaches economics at Toronto and is a research associate at NBER, said the authors limited their research to large introductory courses where instructors don't grade exams and students typically have little interaction with faculty. That way, the results would be likelier to reflect how gender factored into the equation, as opposed to how well a student got to know a faculty member or what type of reputation an instructor had earned with higher-level students.

The data revealed that students taught by instructors of their same sex were overall about one percentage point less likely to drop a course than their counterparts who took courses with professors of the opposite sex. For females, though, the authors estimate no significant difference in the likelihood of dropping a class based on whether the instructor was male or female.

Male students performed slightly better, on average, with a male instructor (in what translates to a 0.6 percentage point increase in expected grade out of 100 percent) than they did with a female instructor. With women, on the other hand, gender of the professor appeared not to matter.

The research also found no important influence from the so-called "role model effect," which measures whether a same-sex instructor would motivate a student to take a subsequent course in his or her field.

"We were more surprised with these findings than we would have been if the results showed that gender had a large effect in the classroom," Oreopoulos said. "There's a lot of interest in these topics, but we just didn't find much correlation."

Oreopoulos said the findings bolster a conclusion he came to in a previous academic paper that subjective qualities, such as how a professor fares on student evaluations, tell you more about how well students will perform and how likely they are to stay in a given course than do observable traits such as age or gender. (He points out, though, that even the subjective qualities aren't strong indicators of student success.)

"If I were concerned about improving teaching, I would focus on hiring teachers who perform well on evaluations rather than focus on age or gender," he said.

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