



Women outdo first-year men at universities

Listen up, men: If you're in first-year university and coasting on average grades, a team of Canadian researchers has sobering news for you.

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Listen up, men: If you're in first-year university and coasting on average grades, a team of Canadian researchers has sobering news for you.

They have uncovered the first evidence that suggests women on campus are not only outnumbering you, they are outperforming you, as well.

In fact, you probably won't make it to second year without academic help. The problem is, most of you don't realize you need it.

A groundbreaking study funded by the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation has found that women are more likely to stay in school and finish their degrees if they are offered a combination of scholarships and academic support.

By contrast, the same incentives offered to male students don't seem to affect their behaviour.

In fact, among men, neither the offer of tutoring nor the prospect of a scholarship, nor the combination of both, appears enough to improve grades or reduce dropout rates.

"On the basis of this study, we can conclude that women are more likely to take advantage of those incentives that allow them stay in college or university," says Daniel Lang, a professor of policy studies at the University of Toronto.

Mr. Lang co-authored the study with U of T economist Philip Oreopoulos and Joshua Angrist, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The finding is the latest in a string of studies that have found it is easier to improve the academic performance of girls and women.

Mr. Lang hopes the study will serve as a wake-up call for male undergrads, who are becoming a minority as record numbers of women flood university campuses.

In particular, Mr. Lang wants to encourage more men to take advantage of tutoring and mentoring services offered to them.

"Now we can say to them, 'There's some research that shows these incentives can make a difference. So boys, smarten up. If your university offers you something like this, don't dismiss it. Take it as something that gives you a serious chance of staying in school,'" says Mr. Lang.

The finding is an early result from a ongoing study examining the broader effects of scholarships and academic support services on student retention.

While university enrolment is at an all-time high, the number of undergrads who perform poorly, drop courses or drop out entirely is also climbing.

In response, universities have introduced generous financial-aid packages and a variety of tutoring and support services to help students cope. \

Yet there has been little research measuring the impact of these efforts on student retention.

As part of their ambitiously designed study, Mr. Lang and his colleagues randomly assigned 650 first-year students at the University of Toronto into one of three groups: those who were offered tutoring; those who were offered scholarships; and those who were offered both.

The performance of all three groups was compared with that of a control group of roughly 1,000 students with similar high school backgrounds, who were offered neither tutoring nor scholarships.

When considered alone, the offer of tutoring and academic support did not appear to reduce student dropout rates.

But the students who were promised scholarships were more likely to remain enrolled in university for a second year. The students who were offered both incentives did significantly better still.

The researchers were particularly interested in learning whether the promise of financial rewards would actually prompt students to use academic support services. On that question, the answer was a clear yes.

"It shows that if we left it to students to make a choice, they wouldn't realize that they have a problem and need help," says Mr. Lang.

"In effect, what they're saying is, 'I'm just as good as any other student.' The only way they can construe of seeking academic support is to see it as a financial transaction."

There were also effects on grades. Among students who enrolled in at least four courses each semester, the students who got the full package -- the academic support and the financial-aid incentive -- had higher grade-point averages than students in the control group.

Most surprising of all, the positive results were almost entirely concentrated among female students.

"It goes against the conventional wisdom that says services offered to both male and female students can produce the same results," says Mr. Lang.