

## Reversing the gender gap: Women surpass men at CSU

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College female students walk on campus at Cal State Los Angeles on Wednesday, Jan. 11, 2012. (SGVN/Staff photo by Watchara Phomicinda)

### CSU Gender Gap

Women are leapfrogging men into the classroom at the nation's largest university system, redefining the gender gap on California State University campuses in a startling way.

About 6 out of 10 CSU graduates last spring were female - a complete reversal over the past four decades. Of the 23 campuses in the CSU system, 20 are majority female. Some, like Dominguez Hills and Stanislaus, have almost twice as many women as men, feeling eerily like women's colleges.

Cal State Los Angeles is about 60 percent female, which puts it in 11th place for campuses with more women than men.

Cal State San Bernardino is even higher, with 63 percent of its students being female.

Women are pouring into college at elevated rates all over the country - not only at two- and four-year schools, but also into professional and graduate programs. The profound shift comes two decades after educators issued an alarming report titled "How Schools Shortchange Girls."

"The trend shows that we're just catching up to where we should have been years ago," said Valerie Talavera-Bustillos, an associate professor of Chicana studies at Cal State Los Angeles. "Women or girls have ... always have done well in school. I think what we're seeing is that women are ... just making that next step."

The student bodies at the University of California and California community colleges average about 55 percent female - slightly less than CSU's 59 percent.

Nationally, women have represented about 57 percent of enrollments at American colleges since at least 2000, according to a report by the American Council on Education. They have surpassed men not only in bachelor's degrees, but also master's degrees and doctorates.

Female enrollment skews even higher among older students, low-income students and minority students - the demographics of the CSU population.

Many private universities can shape their classes - so schools like Stanford, with an incoming class that is 47.5 percent female, and Santa Clara, which is 51.4 percent female, are gender-balanced.

Others, such as Azusa Pacific University, are in the same situation as the CSU system and tilt heavily female. APU's student body is nearly two-thirds female, said David Burke, the director of undergraduate admissions.

But whereas the CSU system has been historically male-dominated, APU has long been a bastion of female students.

"In my 15 years in enrollment, we have never been under 60 percent female and are really trying to reverse that trend," Burke said.

Burke said faith-based private colleges in general tend to be more attractive to women than men. He also said men who marry young will often begin working right after high school.

In an attempt to draw more of that demographic in, Burke said the university is developing "nontraditional forms of education," such as online classes that provide students with more flexibility.

But public schools accept all qualified students, so they reflect a larger societal shift.

Researchers cite several reasons: Women tend to have higher grades and test scores; men tend to drop out of high school in disproportionate numbers; and women recognize they need a college degree to approach pay equity with men.

Lloyd Johnson, a TV and film student at Cal State L.A., said he's noticed that there are a lot of women on campus.

"Girls are just more looking out for themselves now," he said.

Griselda Hernandez, a finance student at the university, agreed.

"A lot of them realize they can't be a stay-at-home mom - it's a sense of independence," Hernandez said.

Hernandez said the university's chapter of the Hispanic Business Association shows further evidence of the strength of the female influence on campus.

"Our board alone is composed of 12 people, and 11 of those are girls," she said.

Jesse Hernandez, a Cal State L.A. biology student, said a psychology class he took gave him some insight into why more women than men are choosing to attend college.

"Guys want instant gratification," he said. "They go to work right away."

The good news is that both men and women are attending college in higher numbers. Applications to attend CSU next fall have surged - from 611,225 to 665,860. The university still doesn't have a breakdown of how many of those applicants are women.

Women's advances don't "translate into a loss for men," said Mikyung Ryu, associate director for the Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education. "It's not a zero-sum game."

One place in the CSU system where women still fall behind in enrollment numbers is at campuses with strong engineering programs, such as Cal Poly Pomona and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

At Cal Poly Pomona, nearly 57 percent of the student body was male - the second-highest percentage in the CSU system after the tiny Maritime Academy.

Figures provided by Cal Poly Pomona officials show just how big an effect its engineering programs have on the ratio of men to women. Of the roughly 4,800 engineering students at the university, about 4,200 are male - slightly more than 87 percent.

Without the engineering program, Cal Poly Pomona's student body would be about 52 percent female.

Cordelia Ontiveros, associate dean of engineering at Cal Poly Pomona, said the dearth of female engineering students boils down to a lack of role models.

She said part of the blame falls on high school guidance counselors who neglect to discuss engineering with their female students and family members who don't encourage them to pursue a career in engineering.

Ontiveros said a little encouragement goes a long way.

"You'll find among many women engineers, one reason they got into it was a relative was an engineer and recommended it to them," she said.

Ontiveros said the university's College of Engineering has implemented a number of programs to reach out to girls still in their formative years.

One program, which operates as a partnership with local school districts, is known as Robotics Engineering Through Active Learning, or REAL.

"Fifty-five percent of those participating in the program are girls," Ontiveros said.

The college also hosts a women's reception on campus and maintains a large student chapter of the Society of Women Engineers, Ontiveros said.

Still, progress has been slow and Cal Poly Pomona has only seen a "very small increase" in the numbers of female engineering students.

"We're really trying to make more of a concerted effort - its really a long-term commitment," Ontiveros said. "We're hoping to see some results in the next few years."

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