Addressing the Gender Gap

A recent *Dallas Morning News* article revealed a growing gender gap in higher education. Women enroll in greater numbers, and, as writer Holly Hacker noted, “In Texas, 52 percent of the men who enroll in public institutions graduate within six years vs. 62 percent of women.”

Although higher education was once a largely male preserve, women flourished once overt barriers were removed. In contrast, current male underperformance cannot be explained by discrimination. No specific laws or special institutional policies stand in the way of young men entering college or succeeding once they get there. Instead, the relative lack of male success in higher education results from subtle cultural and developmental factors that inhibit young men from taking advantage of opportunities.

At Austin College, we have made considerable progress in responding to this alarming trend. We have consistently enrolled men and women at almost equal rates—this year’s freshman class actually has more men than women. And 68 percent of our men graduate within four years and more than 75 percent in six (just under our rate for female students). Even so, we want to raise these rates for all students and have been studying the factors that lead to completion.

In reflecting on our ability to attract, retain, and graduate young men in a challenging climate, three key lessons emerge:

1. **Education must be as adventurous as high profile athletics**: Young men are eager for adventure. They choose colleges that promise excitement and challenge. But too often the only adventures presented are the on-field exploits of a small band of varsity athletes. Our athletics program is competitive, but athletes are students first. We encourage our male students to picture themselves as embarking on a quest, one that will test their mettle; we explain how our inquiry based classes include hands-on experiences such as a student-managed million dollar investment fund, vibrant international immersion programs, internships, simulations, and intensive research opportunities. We promote an education in which students are active participants and not merely spectators.

2. **Mentoring matters**: Every Austin College student is matched with a faculty mentor. Faculty outreach to students begins during the admission process and continues through graduation and beyond. For young men who may be less likely than their female counterparts to ask for academic help, these on-going relationships ease the way to support services and reduce disengagement. And faculty members do the mentoring and advising themselves so they understand the needs of male students in ways that extend into the classroom.

3. **Student and residential life programs must be designed with men in mind**: We learned the importance of building specific programs geared to men that are founded on current research in male social and intellectual growth. Our residential programming for young men fosters healthy male relationships and self-awareness. And we create opportunities
for active community service and leadership in roles that have real consequences and matter to these young men and their peers.

At Austin College, we continue to monitor the outcome of these responses. And we are eager to learn from the experiences of other institutions’ ongoing efforts to help male students achieve academic success. As educators, parents, and policy makers we must work together to support practices that lead to increased graduation rates for all our students. Access to higher education is a first priority, but it is wasted without navigable avenues for achievement.

1Hacker, Holly, “In Texas, the College Graduation Edge Goes to Women.” Dallas Morning News, 10 December, 2011.

Marjorie Hass, Ph.D., is president of Austin College, a private, four-year liberal arts college, in Sherman, Texas. She can be reached at president@austincollege.edu.