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People & Places

Study finds women learn less in college

Findings are based on results of achievement tests given to 19,000 students at 56 four-year colleges and universities across the country.

By [MARY CHALLENGER](#)

Register Staff Writer

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Women may attend college in greater numbers than men, but they apparently learn one-third less, according to a recent study conducted by researchers at the universities of Iowa, Missouri and Florida.

The reasons for the disparity still need to be determined, said co-author Ernest Pascarella, who holds the Mary Louise Petersen Chair in Higher Education at the University of Iowa.

"It's kind of disconcerting to think women may not get as much out of college as men," he said.

The study contains some good news, too, Pascarella noted, especially for parents who can't afford to send their high school senior to Harvard or Princeton. According to the

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research, there seems to be little correlation between how exclusive a college is and how much students learn.

"You're as likely to get a good education at a less selective school as a more selective school," Pascarella said.

Pascarella conducted the study, which appears in the most recent issue of *The Journal of Higher Education*, with two University of Iowa doctoral students, Christopher Pierson and Lamont Flowers, now an assistant professor of education at the University of Florida.

They based their findings on results of achievement tests given to 19,000 college students at 56 four-year colleges and universities across the country.

The data was collected between 1993 and 1998 by Steven Osterlind, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Missouri, while he was developing an achievement test called the College Basic Academics Subjects Examination.

"We took the data and re-analyzed it," Pascarella said.

The study began as a look at how much students learn between their freshman and senior years, but Pascarella said that turned out to be the least important of their findings.

The researchers were surprised to find that although variables such as academic ability, race or college grades didn't seem to have much of an effect on how much students learned, gender did.

While men experienced an increase of approximately 27 to 32 percentile points on their test scores between their freshmen and senior years of college, for women the improvement was only 19 to 23 percentile points, Pascarella said.

That meant the women had apparently learned only two-thirds as much as the men.

Pascarella said the difference could be partially explained by the fact that more men tend to major in math and science, two of the four test subjects. The study didn't take into account courses taken, work experience or other activities.

"But we also found differences across the board which are harder to explain," he said.

Some educators have interpreted the study as evidence that institutions of higher learning are structured toward masculine rather than feminine learning styles but "that's a big leap from our findings," Pascarella said.

"Typically before I believe almost anything in the social sciences, I'd like to see it replicated," he said.

The study's other major finding - that the selectivity of a school has little to do with learning - is consistent with previous studies, Pascarella said. He advises students and parents to use other factors in choosing a college.

"Picking a school just because it's very hard to get into tells you very little about the quality of education you'll get there," he said.

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