

## **Men in Elite, Undergraduate Scholars Programs Distinct from Peer Women in Stress Management, Self Assessment and Goal Setting**

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### **Overview**

A large gap in both literature and practice exists in understanding and supporting both college men and women at the high end of the performance scale, particularly those who are members of the growing number of competitive, highly selective undergraduate scholars and scholarships programs. The differentiation of experiences, actions, and behaviors of typical college men and women is well studied.

Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, and Tarule (1986) and Baxter Magolda (1992) provided insight into the differing cognitive development of male and female college students. These, and other studies, described the “average” college student, leaving less understanding at those students at the upper end of academic achievement. To augment the current literature and fill the void, the Undergraduate Scholars Program Administrators Association (USPAA) conducted a research study in spring 2009 to better understand the unique characteristics of undergraduate scholars population. Several significant results emerged that distinguish men from women in these programs and suggest that men feel stress and pressure at higher levels than women, yet do not exhibit the same resultant emotional responses to stress.

### **Method**

The study was administered via an online survey tool in January 2009 and consisted of 114 items. The 688 participants who completed the survey were members of 11 scholarships programs from nine medium to large institutions (three private, six public) across the United States. Subjects can be considered the top students at their institutions, having completed a rigorous and

competitive application, interview and selection process. Subjects also present a high level of quantitative academic accomplishment. For example, one program’s students average an SAT of 1500 and ACT of 34 over a 10-year period, with all members ranking in the top 1% of their high school graduating classes. Most of these scholarship students are also members of their school’s honors program or honors college.

The survey queried the amount of challenge, stress, and support experienced by students; the students’ satisfaction with college; their engagement in and out of the classroom; and their perceived similarity to other students and other scholars based on social, academic, and leadership criteria.

### **Results**

Of the 688 participants, 58.7% were women, slightly higher than the 57.2% females who comprise general college enrollment, as reported in the 2009-2010 Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac. Compared to the general college enrollment, the current sample has fewer African American and Hispanic responses and more White, Asian American, and multi-racial respondents (see Table 1).

While Protestant (35.9%), Catholic (13.4%) and “other Christian” (13.4%) made up the most frequent religious preferences, a quarter (25%) of the participants identified as “non-religious”. Politically, twice as many scholars described themselves as more left of center than right, with 53% identifying as “very liberal, liberal, or somewhat liberal,” and 24.5% as “very conservative, conservative, or somewhat conservative.” Men, however, identified as conservative at a statistically significantly higher rate than women (27% versus 22%).

The findings of this study present gender-specific differences among academically high-performing students, particularly in regards to stress and support, religious engagement, and life management and goals. As differences between sexes are discussed, mean ratings by sex along with the response scale for that item

are provided in parentheses.

### Discussion

#### *Experiencing and Managing Pressures*

Being a scholarship student means being a member of a high profile organization and receiving significant financial awards. This study investigated how scholars experience and manage stress. The results painted a significant divide between men and women.

While men reported feeling pressure from parents to succeed at a statistically significantly higher level than women (men=3.21, women=2.95 out of 5), women were more likely than men to feel overwhelmed, depressed or like quitting school (see Table 2). The study data supported similar findings of Dyson and Renk (2006) in that women were also more likely than men to meet with a professional (such as a counselor or therapist) or non-professional (such as an academic advisor or club advisor) to discuss personal concerns. Interestingly, men and women do not differ on the amount of pressure created for themselves, which is considerable, with both groups rating their amount of self-induced pressure very high on the scale (men=4.47, women=4.53 out of 5).

While both men and women in scholarship programs create a large amount of pressure to succeed, they differ in how their family backgrounds and support networks impact their college progress. As in Dyson and Renk (2006), Sorokou and Weissbrod (2006), and Trice (2002), women in the present study reported a significantly higher number of parental contacts (via phone calls, emails, texts, instant messages) during a typical week than men. Whether initiated by the student or a parent, women reported between 4 and 6 contacts per week, compared to 1 to 3 for men. In this regard, female scholars (who report greater frequency of feeling overwhelmed, depressed or like quitting school) may be relying on parents for support to a greater degree than men. Women may also be receiving social support from religious networks. Women rated their religious beliefs as significantly more important to them than did men (women=2.69, men=2.46 out of 4) and also described greater religious participation than men (women=2.61, men=2.41 out of 4). In addition, women report a significantly higher

level of participation in community service activities compared to men (women=3.12, men=2.98 out of 4). The combination of increased contact with parents along with increased involvement in religious life suggests women seek and receive social support to a greater degree than men in scholarship programs. These findings support Sorokou and Weissbrod's (2006) conclusion that women received more need-based and non-need-based interactions with their parents than did male participants.

The educational background of the scholars' parents had significant interactions with several student characteristics. First, as a father's educational attainment increased, so too did both men and women's feelings of pressure to succeed. Also, the more educated the father, the more likely students reported feeling like their college choice was not "good enough." However, as a mother's education attainment increased, the idea that "success is more important than the experience" decreased for both men and women. Also, a mother's increased education makes it less likely for both men and women to feel like quitting school at any point in a semester. These findings suggest that high-performing undergraduate scholars have distinct impressions of expectations (spoken or unspoken) from their parents. A highly educated father seems to put more competitive pressure on the student while a highly educated mother seems to foster greater emphasis on the experience than performance. These findings are consistent with Baxter Magolda's (1992) assertion that male students showed a propensity toward individualized thought, achievement and goal attainment, whereas female performance patterns trended toward the gathering and valuing of other's ideas and perspectives.

#### *Life Management and Goals*

The final section of the results highlights significant differences in how men and women in these programs characterize their current achievements and assess their future plans. Comparing themselves to both their fellow scholars and their general campus populations, men reported a significantly more positive self-

assessment in academic performance, leadership and self-confidence (see Table 3).

In a range of questions asking whether respondents accept the opinions of others (religious leaders, college leaders, professors, parents, and friends) over their own, men showed considerably less independent thinking than women. Men reported being significantly more likely to accept the opinions of both their friends (men=2.15, women=1.98 out of 5) and their professors (men=2.33, women=2.2 out of 5) over their own, suggesting that men may lag behind women in developing critical thinking and analytical ability. Men also reported working harder in class than they thought they would in college to meet an instructor's standards or expectations (men=2.30, women=2.24 out of 4). Such findings may depict male patterns of authority figure imitation as a means of seeking approval (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

While men demonstrated the stereotypical preference for team competition, they also indicated an appreciation for group accomplishments. Men responded at a higher rate than women that individual competition brings out the best in people (men=3.34, women=2.90 out of 5), that there should be winners and losers (men=3.33, women=2.89 out of 5), and that they believe projects are best accomplished in groups or teams (men=3.0, women=2.69 out of 5).

Both groups continue to demonstrate a competitive mindset. Men rate themselves smarter than most of their friends (men=3.00, women=2.75 out of 4), and men believe they will be smarter than their parents when they are adults (men=3.03, women=2.72 out of 4). Both findings mirror the male academic overconfidence identified by Sax (2008). Men also indicated a higher level of importance than women of being well-off financially (men=2.57, women 2.40 out of 4) and of winning a major award (men=2.01, women=1.84 out of 4) later in life, both are consistent with previous research findings (Sax, 2008).

Men's confidence in their intellectual ability translates to high self ratings in comparison to their peers. When comparing their abilities to other students at their college, men demonstrate greater self-confidence in their academic ability

(men=4.51, women=4.31 out of 5), in their leadership ability (men=4.16, women=3.92 out of 5), and in reported self-confidence (men=4.01, women=3.72 out of 5). Likewise, when comparing themselves to others in their scholars program, men again demonstrated greater confidence in their leadership ability (men=3.63, women=3.46 out of 5) and reported self-confidence (men=3.68, women=3.42 out of 5). Sax (2008) found lower female self-confidence levels even when prior academic performance showed otherwise. The authors' study thus reinforced Sax's conclusion and further illuminated the academic overconfidence of male college students.

Of perhaps greatest interest is the difference between sexes in preparation for life after college. Compared to women, men reported significantly stronger feelings of preparation academically (men=3.67, women 3.58 out of 4), intellectually (men=3.73, women=3.55 out of 4), and professionally (men=3.49, women=3.38 out of 4).

#### Implications for Practice

Scholars and scholarships programs can make several immediate, feasible programmatic enhancements to ensure they meet the needs of their students as they recognize and manage their stress, build support networks, and develop their confidence and competencies. These programs should be targeted to all members, since male and female high-achieving students feel high levels of stress. However, given that each program and campus has unique missions and cultures, male-specific endeavors can emerge that will work for one program but not another.

First, formally incorporating the campus counseling centers early into the new scholars' first year, both to introduce them to the center services and to help them recognize collectively the pressures they will face, is vital. Since all of these high-achieving students will face stress at a high level, this is sound practice. Further, program-specific administrators and advisors should meet with all students individually each semester. Staff should ask questions geared towards helping the students find outlets to relieve their stress and to encourage them to share their challenges with parents, peers and, if

needed, professionals. Peer mentoring and pairing new students with older students will be effective at allowing the new students to feel comfortable in acknowledging and addressing stress; a senior sharing his or her personal struggles with classes, professional planning and personal issues will likely have more impact than the same message coming from only staff.

To ensure that scholars and scholarships programs better understand the unique characteristics of high-achieving men and develop best practices to support male students, future research should focus on:

- Determining why men report higher levels of pressure and stress, but do not indicate resultant psychological impacts of stress (depression, feeling overwhelmed, and feeling like quitting) or seek out professional or paraprofessional counseling.
- Examining why a father's increased educational attainment increased feelings of pressure to succeed, whereas a mother's increased educational attainment was related to increased appreciation for the process of learning for both men and women scholars.
- Investigating why men are more likely than women to subvert their own opinions in favor of the opinions of their friends and professors.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Race	Percent
White/Caucasian	69.5%
Asian American	11.8%
African American/Black	8.4%
Multiracial	4.4%
Hispanic/Latino	3.8%
Other	1.3%
American Indian/Alaska native	.4%

Table 2. Pressure experienced by gender

Item	Mean for Men	Mean for Women
Pressure from parents*	<b>3.21</b>	2.95
Success is more important than experience*	<b>2.53</b>	2.36
Felt overwhelmed*	2.98	<b>3.36</b>
Felt depressed*	2.20	<b>2.37</b>
Felt like quitting school*	1.28	<b>1.41</b>
Met with a professional to discuss stress*	1.19	<b>1.34</b>
Met with a para-professional to discuss stress*	1.52	<b>1.65</b>

\* Significant difference at  $p < .05$

1-never, 2-almost never, 3-usually, 4-almost always, 5-always

Table 3. Self-comparisons with other students

Comparison Group	Item	Mean for Men	Mean for Women
General college population	Academically*	<b>4.51</b>	4.31
	Socially	3.64	3.51
	Leadership ability*	<b>4.16</b>	3.92
	Self-confidence*	<b>4.01</b>	3.72
Scholarship program	Academically	3.58	3.47
	Socially	3.67	3.61
	Leadership ability*	<b>3.63</b>	3.46
	Self-confidence*	<b>3.68</b>	3.42

\* Significant difference at  $p < .05$

1-Not prepared at all, 2-Minimally prepared, 3-Prepared, 4-Very prepared

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