

Admission Fairness

Girls constitute two-thirds of the top 10 percent of their school classes and apply to college at a higher rate than boys. A college that receives more (and more qualified) female applicants than male but desires a “balanced” student body has to lower its standards for boys — and raise standards for girls.

If you’re looking for gender parity on campus, “there’s not a lot you can do other than discriminate,” Charles Deacon, dean of admissions at Georgetown University. But should we be looking for gender parity on campus, while gender inequity is still so prevalent elsewhere?

When a liberal-arts college lowers its standards for boys — especially white boys — it gives an advantage to a population that has not suffered historical disadvantage and continues to enjoy outsized prominence in almost every professional sphere— in Congress, law, medicine, technology and in finance. Women have enrolled in college at greater rates than men since the early 1980s. They get better grades, drop out less frequently and are more likely to earn a four-year degree. In other words, women in higher education have long been exceeding the criteria that men established for academic success. Even so, women still earn 82 cents to the male dollar. Why?

Here’s my theory: Girls and women excel at school, where there are relatively objective measures of achievement—

grades, scores, classes taken, honors received. After graduation, though, unconscious bias is rarely restrained by the guardrails of, say, GPAs. When we choose our political candidates and our chief executives, we deploy non-metrics such as “electability” and “leadership” — qualities traditionally ascribed to men.

Colleges that tip their scales in favor of boys are bringing those biases to bear four years early, overriding the guardrails to create a student body that feels desirable. Jennifer Delahunty Britz, former dean of admissions at Kenyon College, observes: “Once you become decidedly female in enrollment, fewer males and, as it turns out, fewer females find your campus attractive.”

That entrenched, co-educational, bias is precisely why colleges should stop giving boys a boost. Every time colleges bend their criteria to keep from becoming “decidedly female,” they perpetuate the notion that there is such a thing as having too many female students — and by extension, too many women in any given space. Women who get a fair shot at college might graduate unprepared to accept unfairness in their professional lives. Men who learn in female-majority spaces might graduate unprepared to assume they should be in charge.

Imagine that.