

The Lost Boys

Women now outnumber men at local colleges and universities. And the resulting problems go far beyond finding a date.



GIRLS' SCHOOLS: Women are in the majority on almost every local campus.

A

ANN DULONG isn't someone you'd expect to have dating troubles.

A student and former cheerleader at Boston University, DuLong is in killer shape, with a pretty face and broad smile framed by long chestnut hair. She's outgoing, knows volumes about sports, and is really open to meeting the right guy.

But the odds are against her. These days, college life in Boston is a lot more like *The Bachelor* than *Animal House*.

"There just aren't that many guys around here to date," DuLong says. "The one or two handsome guys who've got their act together, there's a lot of competition for them. It's one cute guy and 50 girls looking at him. It leaves girls scrambling." The coeds in the aerobics classes she teaches are "really cute girls who take care of themselves." Yet they can't find men. "That's the biggest complaint I hear from girls. All of them are like, 'Are you kidding me? We go to BU—there's no one to date!'"

She sighs. "It's a little depressing."

DuLong and her friends aren't imagin-

ing things. BU is about 60 percent female at the undergraduate level, a gender gap that worries some students and continues to irk chancellor John Silber, who was ridiculed last year when he raised the issue (he asserted that the growing surplus of women was distracting to the men) and publicly raised questions about its implications.

Turns out Silber was onto something.

In a complete reversal that has taken only 30 years, today's universities and colleges are increasingly dominated by women, a trend that's only beginning to attract widespread attention. There are nearly 2 million more women than men in college now; by 2010, there will be 138 women for every 100 men. While it's highest among blacks, the gender gap holds true across all racial and ethnic groups, ages, and states. (Maine is at the very top with 154 women per 100 men in college.)

That makes achieving balance between men and women one of the hottest topics in university admissions. A school's survival depends on it. Campuses skewed too far toward one or the other gender can turn off students of both sexes.

"Obviously, students prefer gender bal-

ance," says Jack Dunn, spokesman for Boston College, which, after reaching a high of 55 percent female eight years ago, has wrestled the figure back down to 52 percent in this fall's incoming class. "Students will complain if the numbers are tilted that it's harder to meet people of the opposite sex and date."

"We'd all like to have parity and a 50/50 split," says Richard Nesbitt, who has achieved close to that goal (51 percent female this year) as admissions director at Williams College. If a gender gap grows too wide—say, beyond 60/40—top applicants from both genders may hesitate to enroll "for all kinds of reasons," Nesbitt says.

Schools like BC have comparatively little trouble attracting men, thanks in part to robust athletics programs. Other universities and colleges find it so tough that they're taking drastic measures. Brandeis, for example, whose entering class is 58 percent female, is experimenting this year with sending baseball caps bearing the university's logo to the first 500 men who return cards indicating interest in applying. "We don't know if it will work," says Deena Whitefield, director of enrollment. "But it's important to get men to respond to your first inquiry so you can at least get them in your database." (Like Brandeis, Emerson is nearly 60 percent female. Women comprise 54 percent of first-year students at Bates, 53 percent at Colby and Northeastern, and 52 percent at Tufts, Holy Cross, and Wesleyan. Only at MIT, with its focus on the traditionally male field of engineering, do there remain notably more men than women.)

Of Boston-area schools, BU, with the biggest imbalance, is taking the most aggressive approach. Silber has demanded more photographs of men and men's sports in recruitment brochures and catalogs. "For ROTC, there was only one picture and it was a female," he complains. "I said, 'Let's get it straight: ROTC is predominantly male, so put in pictures of men.'"

And while schools adamantly deny anything smacking of affirmative action based on gender (the University of Georgia dropped admissions preferences for male students after being socked with a lawsuit), there are ways to enroll more men without breaking the law. "Boys score higher on SATs, girls on grade point averages," Silber notes. "I said, 'Stop giving so much favoritism to GPAs.'" Since he started focusing on it three years ago, Silber says he's increased male enrollment by three percentage points. However, he adds, "We still have a long way to go."

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OF COURSE, FIGHTING OVER THE POOL of male applicants misses the bigger question: Why aren't more men going to college?

"It's been framed as a guild issue—how does one college compete against another—rather than what's happening in society with men and women," says William Pollack, director of the Centers for Men and Young Men at McLean Hospital in Belmont and author of the best-seller *Real Boys*. "Putting more men in catalogs is advertising. I don't think advertising will change national trends."

In Massachusetts, 83 percent of female high school graduates enroll in college. But only 70 percent of male grads do, according to a study by Northeastern University and the Boston Private Industry Council. Boys also drop

This fall's class at BU is nearly 60 percent female; Brandeis, 58 percent; Northeastern, 53 percent; and at Tufts, 52 percent.

out of high school at rates 30 percent higher than girls. One hundred thirty-three women will get bachelor's degrees in Boston for every 100 men.

"You'd call it a national crisis," says Pollack, a psychologist who teaches at Harvard Medical School—"if you were looking at it."

So what if men comprise 51 percent of the general public, but only 43 percent of the university and college population? So what if women have to date men with less education? In fact, the stakes are far more serious than the Saturday-night social woes of college coeds. There are economic and social implications, too.

College-educated men earn \$1.25 million more over their lifetimes than men who have only high school diplomas. They're more likely to have jobs and be productive at work, and they pay more in taxes while avoiding such government subsidies as welfare and Medicaid. They are less likely to father children out of wedlock or be convicted of crimes, and more likely to vote, volunteer for civic activities, and describe themselves as happy, according to a report by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies.

In New England's old mill towns, the number of births out of wedlock has soared, notes Andrew Sum, an economist and lead author of the study. In Pittsfield,

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for example, nearly half of children today are illegitimate, double the percentage of two decades ago, while in Lawrence, 63 percent of births are to unwed moms. "Today you have social disasters in a lot of these places," says Sum. "And part of it is that you can no longer do well, on average, without a college degree."

Because high-paying blue-collar jobs have all but disappeared in today's economy, a man without higher education is dooming himself. "They don't have jobs, and they're not looking," Sum says. "They're hanging out, they're chilling out, and we're going to support them for the next 30 years."

Yet this growing group of lost boys has garnered little national attention or interest. Tom Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, was the first to sound a warning when he noticed boys weren't keeping up with the gains that girls were making in higher education. But until recently, no one listened. "We have to find much better answers for boys," he says. "We have to. You can't write off half the population."

What's to blame? Popular culture, in part, which suggests it's not cool for boys to be smart or educated. High school boys spend more time partying, playing video games, and exercising, while girls are studying, doing volunteer work, and caring for their families, according to a UCLA study. There are biological factors at work, too. Girls learn to read and write earlier than boys, and because they're better at sitting still in class, they're less likely to be disciplined. Boys, who already find school difficult, fall behind, become discouraged, and give up.

"We should start teaching them according to how they learn, not according to some idea that boys and girls have to learn the same way," says Pollack, who's working on a pilot program for boys' education, "so boys can do equally well in the classroom without girls going down."

If we don't? "We're already seeing it," says Pollack. "Boys will be more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to go to college, more likely to drift into crime and drugs, less likely to get married or sustain a marriage, less likely to sustain relationships with their children."

Adds Mortenson, "If we can raise organized, purposeful young women, we have to figure out how to do the same thing for boys. And we're not doing it. We are *not* doing it." **B**