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A BIAS AGAINST BOYS

Study's Conclusion Was Foregone

by Patricia Hausman
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The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (CCR) is an “agency in disarray,” concluded the General Accounting Office two years ago. According to its investigation, basic management controls were lacking. Key documents – including financial records—were missing. Commissioners were not monitoring staff projects to insure quality results.

Oddly enough, four CCR commissioners concurred with GAO’s stinging assessment. But the other four—including chairwoman Mary Frances Berry—took sharp exception, describing GAO’s work as “a great injustice to the Commission.”

Last Friday, the Commission approved a report that makes clear that GAO’s criticisms were justified. The book-length work, which charges that the nation’s schoolgirls are denied equal educational opportunity in advanced mathematics and science, is an expanded (and shriller) version of a staff document rejected by the Commission in July of 1997. Though Ms. Berry voted for acceptance at the time, she conceded that the objections of opponents were so global as to make efforts at revision pointless.

Nonetheless, she attempted to renew consideration of the report at the Commission’s next meeting. When that effort failed, the report appeared to have been permanently shelved.

Yet, even though commissioners never voted to revive the report, revisions mysteriously began earlier this year. Last month, commissioners received a new draft for approval at Friday’s meeting. Due to changes in the composition of the Commission, only two of the original four opponents remained, and as expected, were outvoted.

Procedural questions about the unexplained revival of the report pale in comparison to its substance. Far from presenting a convincing case, the report is a sloppy, amateurish work,

filled with unsubstantiated claims and facts contrary to its conclusions.

The introduction asserts that girls face indirect barriers to equal opportunity in advanced math and science—including lesser encouragement from parents, teachers, and guidance counselors. The next chapter provides some numbers to evaluate the claim. Parental encouragement to choose these subjects was reported by 68% of boys and 70% of girls; teacher encouragement by 58% of boys and 64% of girls, and counselor encouragement by 40% of boys and 52% of girls. This is bias against females?

Enrollment figures for eight high school math courses reveal another glaring contradiction. Girls outnumber boys in all but two: calculus and advanced placement (AP) calculus. In the sciences, girls predominate in four of eight subjects. Girls take fewer computer courses—but how surprising is this when they outnumber boys in most math courses? And try this on for nit-picking: when girls do take AP calculus, wails the report, it's often the less demanding version. (This must be why we're called the second sex).

Vexed though the authors may be that girls choose different courses than boys, the reason is clear to psychologists willing to consider explanations other than discrimination. Most females are more interested in people than inanimate objects. As a result, they gravitate toward subjects useful in the life sciences. Contrary to the report's assumptions, decades of nurturing gifted girls in special math programs has not resulted in them choosing careers in the physical sciences as often as boys. These girls apparently realize that their strongest interests lie elsewhere.

That the report appears at a time when males, not females, are under-represented on college campuses seems rather odd. Coupled with its acknowledgement that college-bound girls appear to be taking the math and science courses they need, its justification seems even more elusive.

Strangest of all is a recommendation that the Education Department's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) step up policing of high schools to insure that girls have equal opportunity in math and science. While arguing for more enforcement, the report reveals that OCR receives very few complaints of this nature. In addition, OCR has investigated a number of school districts to determine whether girls were underrepresented in these classes. They were not. Still, the authors want a massive federal effort to combat sex differences in course-taking and career choice.

It is obvious that the authors started with a conclusion, then sought out any quote or information that seemed even mildly supportive, regardless of quality or the credibility of the source. As a result, many of the references are popular books or feminist propaganda. The peer-reviewed scientific literature is woefully underrepresented.

The discussion of standardized tests, including the SAT, exemplifies this lack of balance. One finds the obligatory canard that these tests are often biased against girls (even though they outscore boys in certain subjects).

The most credible explanations for male superiority on some tests – such as the greater variability of males, the tendency for male test-takers to be a smaller and more select group, or true differences in ability – go unmentioned. The authors can hardly claim ignorance of this information; it is laid out clearly in publications they cite in other sections. No matter, they want these tests investigated for gender bias. They also urge finalization of an OCR proposal that would jeopardize use of standardized tests. They praise OCR's ill-conceived draft as a strong document, with nary a word about the huge outcry it provoked.

What we have here is not objective work, but the bureaucratic equivalent of yellow journalism. It is therefore sobering that the Commission is seeking a budget increase of more than 50% over the next two years. Before granting it, Congress should determine how this report was revived without a vote of the Commission – and why a work so wanting will soon be sitting on the president's desk.

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