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Graduates of all-girls schools show stronger academic orientations than coed graduates

UCLA report also shows higher SATs, confidence in math, computer skills

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Female graduates of single-sex high schools demonstrate stronger academic orientations than their coeducational counterparts across a number of different categories, including higher levels of academic engagement, SAT scores, and confidence in mathematical ability and computer skills, according to a UCLA report.

The report's findings, drawn from multiple categories, including self-confidence, political and social activism, life goals, and career orientation, reveal that female graduates of single-sex schools demonstrate greater academic engagement: Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of single-sex independent school alumnae report spending 11 or more hours per week studying or doing homework in high school, compared with less than half (42 percent) of female graduates of coeducational independent schools.

"Women Graduates of Single-Sex and Coeducational High Schools: Differences in their Characteristics and the Transition to College" draws data from the annual Freshman Survey, administered by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. The report, which separately considers female students from independent and Catholic high schools nationwide, is based on a comparison of the responses of 6,552 female graduates of 225 private single-sex high schools with those of 14,684 women who graduated from 1,169 private coeducational high schools.

Linda J. Sax, associate professor of education at the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies and the principal investigator of the study, said: "The generally stronger academic orientations of girls-school alumnae ought to serve them well as they arrive at college, though it remains to be seen whether these advantages are sustained once they are immersed in a coeducational college environment."

Female graduates of single-sex high schools also show higher levels of political engagement, greater interest in engineering careers, measurably more self-confidence in public speaking and a stronger predisposition towards cocurricular engagement.

"The culture, climate and community of girls' schools as a transforming force speaks loud and clear in the results of this study and confirms that at girls' schools it's 'cool to be smart' — there's a culture of achievement in which a girl's academic progress is of central importance, and the discovery and development of her individual potential is paramount," said Meg Milne Moulton, executive director of the National Coalition of Girls' Schools, which commissioned the study.

Among the report's key findings:

Women who attended single-sex schools tended to outperform their coeducational counterparts: Mean SAT composite scores (verbal plus math) were 43 points higher for female single-sex graduates in the independent school sector and 28 points higher for single-sex alumnae in the Catholic school sector.

Graduates of single-sex schools also enter college with greater confidence in their mathematical and computer abilities. The gap in math confidence is most pronounced in the independent school sector, where 48 percent of female graduates of single-sex independent schools rate their math ability "above average" or in the "highest 10 percent," compared with 37 percent of independent coeducational female graduates.

Confidence in computer skills is also higher among female graduates of single-sex independent schools, with 36 percent rating themselves in the highest categories, compared with 26 percent of female graduates of coeducational independent schools. Additionally, 35 percent of female graduates of single-sex Catholic schools rate their computer skills as "above average" or in the "highest 10 percent," compared with 27 percent of their coeducational counterparts.

In an indication of greater, though still low, interest in the field of engineering, alumnae of single-sex independent schools are three times more likely than those from coeducational independent schools to report that they intend to pursue a career in engineering (4.4 percent vs. 1.4 percent).

"Though generally small, many of the favorable outcomes for single-sex alumnae are in areas that have historically witnessed gender gaps favoring men, such as in mathematics, computer science and engineering," Sax said. "Research is needed to clarify whether these benefits are due specifically to gender composition or to the climate and pedagogy that exist in all-girls schools."

Political engagement also is notably higher among female graduates of single-sex independent schools, with 58 percent reporting that it is "very important" or "essential" for

them to keep up to date with political affairs, compared with 48 percent of female graduates of coeducational independent schools. Women at single-sex Catholic schools are also more likely than their coeducational counterparts to value political engagement (43 percent, compared with 36 percent).

Graduates of single-sex schools are also more likely than their coeducational counterparts to report that there is a very good chance they will participate in student clubs or groups while in college: 70 percent of single-sex independent school alumnae anticipate involvement in campus organizations, compared with 60 percent of coeducational alumnae.

Female graduates of single-sex independent schools also show more self-confidence in public speaking, with 45 percent rating their public speaking ability "above average" or in the "highest 10 percent," compared with 39 percent of female graduates of coeducational independent high schools.

In addition to providing descriptive comparisons between single-sex and coeducational alumnae, the study also reports on the many ways in which the single-sex effect remains significant after accounting for key differences between these groups in terms of school characteristics (such as enrollment, location and course offerings) and the demographic backgrounds of the women who attend all-girls schools (such as race/ethnicity, family income and parental education).

These results provide further evidence of the role of single-sex education in promoting women's academic and political engagement, confidence in math and computer skills, and interest in engineering careers.

The report was made possible by a gift from the National Coalition of Girls' Schools.

To download a copy of "Women Graduates of Single-Sex and Coeducational High Schools: Differences in their Characteristics and the Transition to College" (L.J. Sax, E. Arms, M. Woodruff, T. Riggers and K. Eagan), visit www.gseis.ucla.edu/sudikoff.

Linda J. Sax is the founding faculty director of the master's program in student affairs at the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies (GSE&IS) and is an affiliated scholar at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. A 2007–08 fellow of the Sudikoff Family Institute for Education & New Media, an initiative dedicated to the public engagement of GSE&IS scholars, Sax is the author of "The Gender Gap in College: Maximizing the Developmental Potential of Women and Men" (Jossey-Bass, 2008).

The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA is widely regarded as one of the premier research and policy centers on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, the institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies and research training in postsecondary education. For more information, visit www.heri.ucla.edu.

The National Coalition of Girls' Schools (NCGS), a leading advocate for girls' education, conducts research, promotes best practices, supports public outreach activities and sponsors academic conferences with a focus on girls and learning. For more information, contact Sally Reed, director of communications, at US +1 9788771088 or visit www.ncgs.org.