

www.menshealthlibrary.com

Do Boys Need Affirmative Action?

By Malia Blom, JD

The recent issue of Time has an article¹ about de facto affirmative action for boys. I know that, "affirmative action," is one of those hot-button terms that immediately starts arguments and can cause bad feelings, nausea, dizziness, incontinence, and hair loss, so it's probably important to identify just what, exactly, is being referred to as affirmative action in this case. To put it simply, boys (as you know) are slipping behind academically, and are making up an ever-dwindling proportion of college undergraduates. The current national average when it comes to the undergraduate population is about 57-58% female--though it is expected to climb to a 60-40 split in the next several years. Colleges--which still need to attract students, after all--have taken to admitting boys with lesser academic credentials over girls with stronger academic records in order to keep the student population somewhat balanced (or more diverse, if you find the word, "diverse," to be more compelling).

If you think about it, this is much less dramatic than it sounds. After all, colleges take into account any number of things that might allow one student to be admitted over another. At many schools, "legacy" spots for children of alumni are still given consideration, and schools are still allowed to consider race and ethnicity as a positive part of the application packet in the name of creating a more diverse student body. Heck, a prospective student with acceptable grades, an impressive 50-meter dash, and a positive gift for breaking tackles at the line of scrimmage can get accepted over someone with more impressive academics and no athletic ability whatsoever. Academic records themselves can be subjective--a C- from one school district can reflect more knowledge, learning, and effort than a B+ in another. It's complicated--that's all I'm saying. And colleges have determined that having too great an imbalance of sexes is bad for their school (or ability to attract new students) and are responding accordingly.

So, as far as that goes, I can't say that I can get all that worked up over the idea that boys are getting some admissions preferences over girls--and I say that as a woman and the as the mother of a girl. But, I can understand why people do get upset. It seems un-American somehow for anything other than merit to count for this kind of thing, practicalities be damned. To be honest, my biggest problem with affirmative action for boys is that it helps to keep the boy crisis under wraps. I think that we might be quicker to acknowledge the depth of the problem--and the need to do something about it--if the academic race wasn't being handicapped to obscure boys' slide in academic achievement.

1. Gibbs, Nancy. "Affirmative Action for Boys." April 3, 2008.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1727693,00.html> (accessed April 8, 2008).

(From a blog dated April 8, 2008 found at www.boysandschools.com)