

Gender and Competition: From the Lab into the Classroom

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Abstract

Evidence from the experimental economics literature suggests that females perform less effectively than males in competitive environments. I assess the external validity of this finding in a regular non-experimental setting: that of the classroom. The 1997 Ontario Secondary School reform created a ‘double cohort’ of secondary school graduates, drastically increasing the number of university applicants in September 2003. Given the limited number of places available in universities, the quality of accepted students was significantly higher in that year than in previous years, significantly increasing competition for high grades in the classroom. Examining student academic performance of the 2001 and 2003 entering cohorts at a large Ontario university, I find that male students coped better with the increased competition than females. In particular, the male university average increased relative to females, as did the proportion of male students graduating ‘on time’. These results emphasize the presence of gender differences in performance under increased competition in important real-life situations; supporting the findings of the experimental economics literature.

Keywords: competition, gender, higher education, performance.

JEL classification: J16, I21.

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