

Gender and Competition: From the Lab into the Classroom

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Abstract

Gender differences in response to increased competition have been found in several prominent experimental studies, based on specific tasks performed in laboratory settings. This paper provides the first empirical evidence of such gender differences in a regular classroom setting. It takes advantage of a major high school reform in Ontario that 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 far 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 one of North America's largest universities, 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 underline the presence of gender differences in the face of increased competition in important settings outside the experimental laboratory.

Keywords: competition, gender, higher education, performance.

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