

Claudia Buchmann Looks At Gender Reversal In Higher Education

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SPEAKERS

David Staley, Claudia Buchmann, Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Eva Dale

E Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

D David Staley 00:32

Claudia Buchmann is Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. Her current research focus is on gender, race, and class inequalities in education in the United States and internationally, with a particular focus on the growing female advantage in college completion. She has served as Deputy Editor of the American Sociological Review and Chair of the Sociology of Education section of the American Sociological Association. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Buchmann.

C Claudia Buchmann 01:02

Thank you, I'm happy to be here.

D David Staley 01:03

Your latest book is titled *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools*. There's a lot to unpack in that short title. Tell us, first of all, what do you mean by the rise of women in this context?

C Claudia Buchmann 01:18

Yes, well, the rise of women relates to the fact that, in a very short period of time, the last three to four decades, women went from being the underrepresented group in higher education to really being the majority. Today, 56% of all college degrees go to women, and that's a pretty remarkable change in a short period of time. So we sometimes refer to it as the gender reversal in higher education.

D David Staley 01:44

What caused this, or have we been able to determine that?

C Claudia Buchmann 01:48

Well, we spent several hundred pages in the book trying to talk about just that. The causes are two fold: one side of the question, that you just asked, has to do with what happened to women and the expectations for women in society, but the other flip side of it is also what's been going on with men, because part of this gap, this growing gap that is a female favorable gap in higher education, has to do with men stagnating college completion rates. So, I'd be happy to tell you more about each piece of that.

D David Staley 02:24

Yes, please do.

C Claudia Buchmann 02:25

So what happened over the course of 50 years, was that women used to, of course, be expected to be primarily homemakers, and be the primary caregivers of children. That was sort of the classic 1950s era of the American household and family, and several changes really had a big impact that drove women to higher education in higher numbers. Some of those changes were brought about by women's abilities, or the expectations for women to go into the labor market. Of course, we had the 1960s, where we had a massive civil rights movement that changed the ideas of what equality looked like both for women and minorities, and legislation that came with that, that basically outlawed discrimination for women in the labor market. So, a rapid widescale social change in the expectations of women. In addition to that, we had a situation where marriage and fertility changed a lot. We don't think about it often, but the advent of the birth control pill in the 60s was a huge impact because it allowed women for the first time to really be able to control their fertility and delay having children. And they could do that without even having a conversation with their spouse, right, they could take the birth control pill discreetly. So that helped women be able to go to college and delay marriage and childbearing. Another important piece is the divorce rate really went up during that time. And so, in fact, the first generation of women to outpace men in college degrees was my generation, I went to high school in the 1980s, and went to college in 1985. And it was right

around that period that women of my age were looking around and saying, wow, when my parents got divorced, because more and more American marriages were ending in divorce at that period, my mom ended up being in a really bad situation. She hadn't been prepared to be economically independent, she struggled financially, she had to go back to school, or she had to try to get a job, and that generation of women really said that's not going to happen to me. Certainly they still expected and hoped to get married and have children in large numbers, but they also wanted that economic security of being financially independent, should it come to that.

D David Staley 02:25

So that explains women and their increasing rates of degree completion. What's happening with men, then, through this period?

C Claudia Buchmann 03:31

Yeah, in fact, that part of it is a much greater puzzle, which I don't think we have figured that out entirely. Because we know that over the period of the last four decades, what economists and sociologists call the "returns" to a college degree or the "premium" that one gets having a college degree versus having only a high school diploma, those...

D David Staley 05:22

The ROI, the return on investment of college degrees.

C Claudia Buchmann 05:24

Exactly, the ROI continues to go up, and that's true for men and women. So one really interesting question is why, even though it's generally known that a college degree is beneficial for your earnings - I mean, people predict over a million dollars over the course of a lifetime in terms of earnings to a college degree relative to not having a college degree - what happened with men? And really since, you know, the birth cohorts of the 1950s, that group of men has... the college completion rates have been stagnant. Now, we do unpack this in the book, and we have several explanations that I think, you know, we need to dig deeper into them, but a couple of things: first of all, it used to be true that men could have a good middle class life with job security in the blue collar trades, right, the skilled trades that did not require a college degree, and those were traditional trajectories for men, often union jobs, that paid out pensions, that were good jobs. And we think that maybe men haven't gotten the message that those jobs have dwindled, both in terms of their stability, but also in terms of their numbers. We also have studied the fact that the rates of college going among men really vary by social class background.

D David Staley 06:43

How so?

C Claudia Buchmann 06:44

It's men who grew up without a father in the household. As we know, the rise of single mother families in this country has increased substantially over recent decades, so boys who grew up without a father present, or with an uneducated father, a father who was perhaps working in these blue collar trades; they are much less likely to go to college and complete college than their middle class and upper class counterparts. So we think that that's the group that we really need to focus on to understand what's happening. Another thing we talk about in the book, though, has to do with preparation for college, and the truth of the matter is women and girls have been outperforming boys and men academically for many, many decades. This is not a new phenomenon, girls...

D David Staley 07:29

Measured by ACT scores?

C Claudia Buchmann 07:31

No, not so much ACT scores, but let's talk about grades in school.

D David Staley 07:35

I see.

C Claudia Buchmann 07:35

Okay, so the most important predictors of going to college and doing well in college is actually prior performance in school. In fact, in other research that I've done, we've showed that ACT scores are actually a pretty poor predictor of how well you're going to do in college, they predict about 10% of the difference among students going to college in terms of their academic performance. In the book, we really focus on grades, GPA, overall high school GPA, and rigor of coursework, right? So if you're thinking about your own child who might be going to high school, and what do you want them to do to be able to get into a good college and succeed in college, you want them to work hard, get good grades, take studying seriously, and you want them to take college-prep curriculum, right, most middle class and upper class parents know those kinds of things. The interesting thing is that boys tend to not do that as often as girls. So for example, high school GPAs, girls on average, and these are... when I say on average, I'm talking about large scale national data collected by the Department of Education Statistics that we analyzed, that have data for the last 40 years, girls have consistently gotten a 0.4% higher GPA on average than boys. Okay, so, in another part of the study, we find that actually middle school is a really vital time where we see these divergent trajectories. And I don't think most people would know that the difference in getting all A's in middle school versus getting Bs and

Cs in middle school, eighth grade, makes a huge difference in terms of your likelihood of going to college and completing college successfully. And boys are much more likely to get Cs in middle school and high school than our girls.

J Janet Box-Steffensmeier 09:28

I'm Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Interim Executive Dean and Vice Provost for The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. Did you know that 23 of our programs are nationally ranked as top 25 programs, with more than ten of them in the top ten? That's why we say the College of Arts and Sciences is the intellectual and academic core of The Ohio State University. Learn more about the college at artsandsciences.osu.edu.

D David Staley 09:53

Did your research consider what's happening in high schools and middle schools that might be producing these disparities?

C Claudia Buchmann 09:59

Absolutely we looked into that. And what's important to point out here, I think people are often inclined to say, well, that must just mean girls are smarter than boys, right, and that's absolutely not the case. Good science shows that boys and girls are relatively similar, very similar in terms of cognitive ability overall, when you look at the sort of range of cognitive ability, the curves for boys and girls look almost the same. So it's not about that, it's about behaviors, it's about practicing. Girls are much more likely to report that they're engaged in school, that they like school, they report doing more homework than boys, studying more hours a week than boys. We think that there are many things going on that explains boys' disengagement with school. One of them has to do with, frankly, norms about what it means to be a boy and be a cool boy among peers when at that stage of adolescence, that's so important, right? When kids become teenagers, what do they care about? They care about what their friends think, what their peers in school think. And among some boys, being cool and being accepted among your peers means not taking your schoolwork seriously. Other scholars have written about the effortless achievement that boys have to engage in. In other words, they can't talk about how much they studied for the test the night before. And if they do do that, they're often disparaged by their peers as being nerds or even actually being fags, or pussies. There's become this derogatory feminization of doing well in school, which I think is really interesting.

D David Staley 11:41

You had remarked about the relatively quick reversal here in this disparity. Another conclusion you reached in your book is that this isn't just an American phenomenon, that we see this across the world.

C Claudia Buchmann 11:53

Claudia Buchmann 11:55

Yes.

D

David Staley 11:55

First of all, is that unusual? Is that sort of sociologically unusual, and what might be the cause of this broad reach of this trend?

C

Claudia Buchmann 12:02

Yeah, we were struck when we started to really look internationally at the data for a wide range of countries. And in the book, we have a map of the whole world, and we show how this map today is now in more countries in the world than not, Women are now the majority of people going to college and on to higher education. And that was quite striking to me. I think that the way culture has changed throughout much of the world, certainly not all of the world, but has changed for women for it to be acceptable, if not necessary, for women to work in this global economy, and the fact that more education is beneficial for them to be able to do that, I think that that in part explains that trend everywhere in the world. Of course, there are important variations that we need to dig into deeper.

D

David Staley 12:57

So what are the implications of the shift for higher education, and I'm thinking specifically about the way in which universities are organized?

C

Claudia Buchmann 13:06

Yeah, that's a huge question. About two years ago, I spoke to seminar of college admissions officers about this issue and I also did some research into what are colleges doing about this. There was a really interesting article in Newsweek a couple years ago, where the UNC, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, the proportion of female undergraduates at UNC was more than 60% female. And this was a concern because, oftentimes in the past, we talked about college is the place that women went to get their "Mrs. Degree", right?

D

David Staley 13:40

To find a husband.

C

Claudia Buchmann 13:41

To find a spouse, yeah, right. And the truth of the matter was, men and women often would find their spouse or their life partner in college. And so when you have this gender imbalance on college campuses, it raises all sorts of interesting challenges for social relationships on campus. And the other interesting issue that that raises is questions about affirmative action.

Several years ago, the Director of Admissions at Kenyon College wrote an op-ed piece in The New York Times apologizing to all the highly accomplished women that Kenyon College rejected because of this gender imbalance that they were trying to address. And she openly admitted that Kenyon was admitting less academically qualified males because of this concern with gender, at least parity or rough parity, on college campuses. I should point out that Ohio State is an interesting situation, in that our undergraduate student population is 52% male and 48 point something percent female, but the reason for that is our engineering school. Okay, so engineering is one of the few majors that remains male-dominated. Engineering and computer science are the two majors in which still less than 20% of the student population is female. If it weren't for that engineering school on Ohio State's campus, our campus would look much like those throughout the United States where there is female majority among undergraduates. So this raises really interesting questions about admissions, right? How do colleges and universities try to get some sort of gender parity on their college campuses, liberal arts colleges and universities in particular, Kenyon is an example. My husband teaches at Ohio Wesleyan University, another liberal arts college; there you're really seeing, you know, women are far out enrolling men at liberal arts colleges and universities.

D

David Staley 14:33

This book, this research, The Rise of Women, how does, how does this research fit within the rest of your research portfolio? Can you situate this research within your larger research approach, or your research questions?

C

Claudia Buchmann 16:00

Yeah, so sociology is a wonderful discipline, as is arts and sciences in general. Sociology is an example of an arts and sciences discipline that allows you to take a very circuitous route through studying and investigating things, very diverse things across your career. I did my dissertation research on Kenya and children's schooling in Kenya, trying to understand how, in a developing society where education has become this, the primary path to a better life, how do people navigate that, and how do they make decisions about their children's schooling? That was my early career, then I kind of have come full circle to study higher education in the United States because, again, for some of the same reasons, right? I think that when we think about what is the primary pathway to a better life in the United States, people tend to think of a college degree. We are a college for all society, by that I mean, other industrial societies have alternative pathways to good jobs, and secure lifestyles. Germany's often held up as an example that has a really strong kind of apprenticeship training system where students don't have to go to college to be able to get a good job. Unfortunately, we don't have a strong vocational training in this country, and so college is really kind of the holy grail for social mobility. So my other research has focused on different groups and society, whether that's immigrant groups, groups of different race and ethnic backgrounds, in this case, gender, how they try to navigate those pathways, what are the barriers to social mobility for different groups? Honestly, the book, doing the research for that book really helped me understand that we have to go back even earlier in the life course, of course, maybe starting with preschool, to really think about, you know, how can we provide that kind of equality that we'd like to think about exists in this country, but often doesn't.



D David Staley 18:00

I understand that, because you're a department chair, that means you have more administrative responsibilities and less teaching responsibilities, but I'm still interested to know about the courses that you teach and in particular, how your research influences what you teach?

C Claudia Buchmann 18:13

Yeah, so the last few years, I've been primarily teaching graduate students, and I teach graduate students seminar on kind of the nuts and bolts of how to do sociological and kind of quantitative research. But at the undergraduate level, I've taught classes on social stratification, which has been hugely rewarding. You know, students often come to college, especially if they've lived in a relatively secure situation, they come to college thinking that, oh, I got here, because, you know, I'm the best and brightest, not understanding the whole range of advantages, especially kind of upper class, white students have, you know, experienced. And so we unpack that in that social stratification class. And we talk about how structures and institutions really shape who gets ahead and why, you know, the way government provides systems of benefits for middle and wealthy individuals, that really, being poor, right is actually a cost in and of itself. And that is often one of the most rewarding experiences I have as an educator, because to me, that's about educating citizens and also educating with empathy, teaching our students to be less judgmental, and to think about how were the policies or the larger institutions shaping people's trajectories in terms of who's ahead and who's behind.

D David Staley 19:39

So what's next for your research?

C Claudia Buchmann 19:41

That's a good question. I'm looking forward to thinking about that, as I stepped out of the chair role and be able to focus more on my full time research. I think the trend that I've talked with you about in terms of the gender specific trends in higher education, there are many other interesting demographic big trends happening in higher education.

D David Staley 20:02

Such as?

C Claudia Buchmann 20:03

Well, the post-millennial generation, okay, that's the students who are going to be coming through the doors of Ohio State or potentially coming through the doors of Ohio State in the next decade, is going to look very different, and we're already seeing those changes on the ground. But basically, there're different first of all in that there are going to be fewer of them. So the demographic shift that the baby boomers, right, you and I are baby boomers, that group

is getting older. And birth rates have declined in the last several decades, so especially in the midwest and northeastern parts of this country, there is going to be 15% fewer students of college age to come to Ohio State or other similar colleges and universities.

D David Staley 20:53

So you've said that we're undergoing these major demographic changes, and you've also said that we will have to reinvent higher education in many ways. In what sorts of ways?

C Claudia Buchmann 21:04

Yeah, we'll have to be much more responsive to groups of people, to our clients, if you will, in terms of providing them with flexible learning, we will have to be ready to educate people who have not come from strong High School backgrounds, are not necessarily ready to just jump in and, you know, take detailed lecture notes, we're going to have to prepare people for seven and eight careers over their lifetime, so it's less about content based learning and more about training people to be flexible. The economy is changing the workplace is changing in radical ways and higher education really needs to be helping a diverse group of learners, including non-traditional age students, first generation college students, and others to be ready to step into that workforce.

D David Staley 22:03

Claudia Buchmann. Thank you.

C Claudia Buchmann 22:05

Thank you.

E Eva Dale 22:06

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