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Closing the gender gap

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Furmanreports

Closing the gender gap

Furman working to combat decline in male degree seekers

When it comes to college enrollment, the statistics don't lie: Women are fast outnumbering men.

The U.S. Department of Education has reported that in 2001, the percentage of men at more than 4,000 institutions of higher learning was 44 percent. And that number is dwindling; the department says that, by 2010, the percentage is expected to drop to 42 percent. Moreover, since 1980, the percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded to men has fallen from 51 percent to 44 percent.

Which leads to the question: Are men an endangered species on college campuses?

Well, not just yet. But many schools — and especially liberal arts institutions — are seeing their male enrollment reflect the downward national trend.

The percentages caught up with a number of quality liberal arts colleges in 2003, and Furman was no exception. Since 1997, Furman had consistently enrolled classes that maintained a female-to-male ratio of roughly 55 to 45 percent, which was in line with the national average. But in the freshman class that enrolled in the fall of 2003, the ratio slipped to 60-40 — and led to some strategic planning in the Admissions Office.

Woody O'Cain, director of admissions, points out that liberal arts colleges are usually regarded as friendlier, more prestigious and more rigorous than larger institutions — and thus tend to be more attractive to women, who are, statistically, stronger students than men. Men, he says, tend to be more vocationally minded and therefore less interested in the broad-based education offered at liberal arts institutions. They often prefer larger universities with schools of engineering, architecture and business. Men also see bigger institutions as offering stronger athletic programs and a more exciting social life.

Given these considerations, O'Cain and his staff took a proactive approach to recruiting the Class of 2008 and adopted specific strategies to increase the number of male applicants to Furman — without affecting the overall academic quality of the class. Their efforts included:

- Expanding recruiting efforts in the university's primary market — the



Southeast, particularly the two Carolinas and Georgia. During the fall recruiting season, Furman admissions counselors visited 72 high schools in Georgia (compared to 27 the previous year) and 53 in North Carolina (compared to 37). During these visits, they targeted strong male students. In addition, the office participated in 140 College Fair programs, as opposed to 88 previously, and visited 200 more high schools than in the fall of 2002.

- Using programs and information sessions to emphasize how well Furman students do after they graduate. O'Cain says he often hears questions about whether a liberal arts school can properly prepare students for careers. For those skeptical parents — usually fathers — who wonder if a liberal arts college can meet their child's vocational needs, O'Cain says that personal testimonials are especially effective.

He cites an example of a meeting in Nashville, Tenn., where Ted Cain '74, an assistant football coach at Vanderbilt, responded to just such a question by offering a glowing report about what Furman has done both for him and for his son, Matt '05. "That's a great thing for any parent to do," says O'Cain.

- Emphasizing the balance between Furman's academic and extracurricular programs. As O'Cain points out, "We have

an outstanding academic reputation, but at the same time we have great intramurals, a thriving club sports program, eight fraternities and very successful Division I varsity athletics. College-age men find these things appealing."

How did these and other strategies impact recruiting for the Class of 2008? The number of male applicants increased by 5 percent, from 1,565 to 1,646, while freshman applications overall were up 2 percent (3,942 vs. 3,888). More significantly, the number of men who chose to enroll at Furman also rose 5 percent, meaning 45 percent of the Class of 2008 arriving on campus September 7 will be men.

"If we can continue to enroll a similarly high percentage of our male applicants, we'll be in good shape," says O'Cain. "An important element in recruiting is word of mouth. Once you enroll a real live person, their testimony to friends and acquaintances is more powerful than any marketing effort."

The ultimate goal, says O'Cain, is to maintain a male-female ratio that is consistently in line with the national average. "It's best for both the social and academic health of the campus," he says.

— Jim Stewart