The Student Engagement Gender Gap

An Exploration of Gender Differences in Extracurricular Participation and Motivation in Higher Education

*Survey Analysis Report*

Rachel Cutsumpas
Whalen Symposium
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To analyze differences in participation in and motivation behind extracurricular involvement, an exploratory research study was conducted at Ithaca College. The purpose of this study was to examine differences in gender representation in extracurricular involvement in higher education. Both primary and secondary research was conducted on topics of student engagement, extracurricular attendance and participation. The study was intentionally designed to be specific to Ithaca College’s campus community and provide a deeper understanding of what motivates students to participate in extracurricular activities.

This survey analysis report is an excerpt of the full research project. The full project includes additional primary research in the form of interviews and focus groups and will be completed in May 2020.
Topic Explanation

Why student engagement research?
My Path to Student Engagement

Student engagement and involvement has defined my experience at Ithaca College. The organizations I’ve been involved with since my first year have provided me with amazing friendships, mentors, and leadership skills. I enjoyed working with so many different students and began working as a Student Leadership Consultant in the Office of Student Engagement during my sophomore year. As an extension of the Division of Student Affairs and Campus Life, working in this office laid the groundwork for my interest in this area. As I was planning workshops and assisting other student organizations, I regularly thought about why students do or do not get involved on campus.
Why Student Engagement Research?

My experience working as an SLC, personal observations, and conversations with professional staff members attracted me to this research topic. I noticed a much greater number of women than men getting involved in student organizations and other engagement programs, but couldn’t determine a concrete reason why. My major and many of my own involvements skew majority women-identifying students, so I wanted to know if this was a campus-wide pattern or not.

Does gender even have an impact or are some people just predisposed to involvement and engagement more than others? I attempted to answer this question and examine what motivates students to get involved through designing this research study.
Data Disclaimer

It is important to note that this is not perfect data.

As with any study that relies on self-report methods, there are bound to be flaws in the data. However, as an exploratory study, this research is intended to be an initial look into patterns of student engagement and hopefully inspire further research in this area. The results of the survey might only be a fraction of the full student body at Ithaca College, but they can still provide meaningful information about involvement motivation and participation.

Potential biases in this data include the sample size and participant demographics (Appendix B-D). As will be explored through this study, significantly more women than men completed the survey. In addition, there was a greater percentage of survey participants from the School of Communications compared to other academic schools.
The scope of this research study focuses primarily on cisgender men and women. Non-binary and transgender perspectives were collected and incorporated into the analysis of the survey data. However, due to the very small sample sizes of these populations (Appendix B), data from non-binary and transgender survey responses was not able to be incorporated into all areas of the study.
Student Engagement & Involvement Survey

Logistics, Administration, & Participation
The survey was conducted online and administered via an anonymous Google Form. The instrument (Appendix A) has 34 total questions, using a combination of multiple choice, Likert scale, and free response formats. Screening questions and branch logic was used to ensure only relevant participants were taking the survey. The survey was given to current Ithaca College students, in addition to recent alumni who graduated within the past five years (class of 2015-2019).

The survey instrument and recruitment practices were approved by Ithaca College’s Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval #132). Survey respondents were recruited via email, flyers, social media, and personal outreach. All respondents were eligible to enter a drawing for a $20 Amazon gift card after completing the survey.
Survey Participation

243 Total Survey Responses

Gender Identities Represented
- Women
- Men
- Transgender
- Non-Binary

Ithaca College Students
- Recent Alumni
  Class of 2015 - 2019
- Current Students
  Class of 2020 - 2023

All 5 academic schools represented
Key Insights
Research Findings & Analysis
When examining the survey data, four patterns emerged:

1. **Women at Ithaca College are more involved than men, and their involvement increases over time.**

2. **Women face added pressure and feel like they have to do more to compete with their male counterparts.**

3. **Women look for career advancement opportunities in extracurriculars. Men are more socially motivated.**

4. **Gender impacts the type of involvement for students who identify outside of the gender binary.**
Supporting Data

These patterns are all supported by various data points from the survey responses. Additional data provided by Ithaca College was used to supplement these findings. This includes data from IC Engage, a portal and database for student organizations at Ithaca College.
Insight #1

Women at Ithaca College are more involved than men, and their involvement increases over time.
Across various involvement types, there are more women than men participating in student engagement activities at Ithaca College. 18% more women reported being members of a student organization than men in the survey. This pattern is evident in a wide variety of student organization types and topics, and even extends into campus employment. 71.7% of women respondents listed having a campus job as involvement, compared to only 53.3% of men.
Women Are Involved at a Deeper Level

The survey data also suggests that more college women are involved at a deeper level than men. This might be in the form of leadership positions, the amount of involvements, or other additional responsibilities beyond just membership.

63.1% of women respondents reported holding a leadership position in a student organization, compared to only 46.5% of men. However, data from IC Engage, the portal used by all college recognized student organizations, suggests this difference is actually even greater. Recognized student organizations are required to list their officers in IC Engage and in the 2019-2020 academic year there were 979 women who held officers positions, compared to 429 men. While there is currently a higher percentage of women undergraduate students than men (56.4% vs 41.7% respectively), this difference in leadership roles is not proportional.

Student Organization Officers
IC Engage, 2019-2020
Women Are Involved at a Deeper Level

Women students are also more involved in the larger campus community, not just within the groups they have a direct tie to. Although it is not used at all events, many offices, academic departments, and student organizations at Ithaca College use IC Engage to track attendance at their events. Since switching to this platform, most large scale events at the college track attendance with IC Engage and students’ ID numbers. Between August 2019 and February 2020, women attended an average of 2.23 events each, whereas men attended an average of 1.57 events each. In addition, 72% of women and 65.3% of men attended at least one event during this time period (tracked by IC Engage). This data suggests that women students are involved at a deeper level in various aspects of their college career.

Average Events Attended
IC Engage, August 2019 - February 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.57</td>
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72% of women and 65.3% of men at Ithaca College attended at least one event between August 2019 and February 2020.
While the amount of students who are very heavily involved in extracurriculars is much smaller than the general student population, there are more women among those who devote a large portion of time to these involvements. This pattern holds true even among the most involved students. 10.1% of women survey respondents noted spendings 18 hours or more on extracurricular involvements each week, compared to 6.8% of men. In addition, 20.83% of women alumni surveyed (class of 2015-2019) indicated this level of high involvement. Perhaps women students get more involved and devote more time to extracurriculars as they progress through their college career, as compared to other students.
Many Women Borderline Being Over-Involved

12.6% of women specifically mentioned wishing they “did less”

When asked what they would change about their extracurricular involvement, survey respondents noted:

“I would be involved less and focus on what really mattered towards my future career and my interests.” ~ Woman, Class of 2021, School of Business

“I would have done less. A lot less. … Now that I will be a graduate soon, I have learned my lesson and am cutting down a lot.” ~ Woman, Class of 2020, School of Business

“I would have worried less about not doing enough. Looking back, I was doing plenty and should’ve spent more personal time on myself!” ~ Woman, Class of 2019, School of Communications
Insight #2

Women face added pressure and feel like they have to do more to compete with their male counterparts.
College Women Experience More Stress

According to the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment, women students face higher levels of stress, exhaustion, and anxiety than men.

- 90% of women students reported feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do, 15 percentage points higher than college men.
- 64% of women students reported feeling overwhelming anxiety, 18 percentage points higher than college men.
- 86% of women students reported feeling exhausted (not from physical activity), 14 percentage points higher than college men.
Women students feel a greater pressure to be perfect than men. When survey respondents were asked to rank their feelings towards the statement “I regularly feel pressure to be perfect,” 28.4% more women agreed or strongly agreed. However, many men respondents noted they did not feel this pressure regularly and disagreed with this statement (20.5% of men survey respondents).
Women college students compare themselves to their peers on a regular basis. This is not the case for men, at least not to the same degree. 12.1% more women survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I regularly compare myself to my peers” than men. Furthermore, 22.7% of men respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, compared to only 6.9% of women.

“I regularly compare myself to my peers a college student.”
Survey data shows that college women often feel like they are not doing enough. When survey respondents were asked to rank their feelings towards the statement, “I regularly feel like I am not doing enough as a college student,” 56.4% of women respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, compared to 36.4% of men. While both men and women disagreed with this statement, a greater number of men than women disagreed. 45.5% of men respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, compared to 27.7% of women, showing how the majority of men feel like they are doing enough.
Women Need to Prove Themselves

“In what ways, if any, do you think gender identity plays a role in the pressures and stresses felt by college students?”

58.7% of women respondents noted added pressures related to being a woman in their responses

24.4% of women respondents mentioned that women students need prove themselves in their responses

13.4% of women respondents mentioned that women face added pressure to be taken seriously by others

Even if they are very subtle influences, the majority of women respondents noted added pressures felt in college related to being a woman in their responses (58.7%). Various survey responses from women mentioned how women students face more pressure than men in college (13.4%), added pressure to be taken seriously by peers, professors, and others (13.4%), and pressure to compete for future jobs (11.8%). All of these pressures factor into a feeling among women students that they need to do more, work harder, and prove themselves on a regular basis (24.4%).
Women Need to Prove Themselves

When asked about the role gender identity plays on the pressures and stresses felt by college students, survey respondents noted:

“Females might feel more stressed because they often face more obstacles in the real world.” ~ Man, Class of 2022, School of Communications

“As someone who identifies as a woman, I feel pressure to prove myself as academically capable and intelligent. I find myself having to push against my male peers and inserting myself in order to be taken seriously and regarded as intelligent.” ~ Woman, Class of 2020, School of Humanities and Sciences

“As a women in STEM, I think that my gender identity added an additional pressure as to the fact that my field is male-dominated. I felt that I had to excel academically and in academic-related extracurriculars in order to prove myself to male peers.” ~ Woman, Class of 2021, School of Humanities and Sciences

“As a woman of color, there are more pressures to be successful in every aspect of our lives. Especially attending a PWI, we’re constantly facing imposter syndrome and pressure to validate our space in the classroom and on campus. In my experience, I didn’t really practice self care until it was crucial because I felt taking time to take care of myself showed weakness.” ~ Woman, Class of 2019, School of Humanities and Sciences
Women Regularly Worry About the Future

Survey data shows that college men are less worried about the future than women. **70.7% of women respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I am frequently worried about my future as a college student,”** compared to 56.8% of men. Of course, college men do think and worry about their future, but not to the same degree or as frequency as college women.

In addition to this worry surrounding their future, college women reported feeling less confident than men regarding career success. When asked to rank their feelings towards the statement “I feel confident I will be able to achieve my career goals,” the majority of survey respondents agreed (47.3%). Yet, much more men respondents strongly agreed with this statement (47.7%) than women (22.9%). Women are likely more hesitant to strongly agree with this statement because they feel like they have to do more to be perceived on the same level as their male counterparts, and might see more potential barriers in their future than men.
The stress and pressure felt by college women impacts their level of extracurricular involvement, more so than it does for men.

64.9% of women survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The pressures I feel as a college student impact my level of extracurricular involvement,” compared to 41.9% of men. Furthermore, 34.9% of men respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, compared to 13.3% of women. Based on data from stress-related questions in the survey, it is clear that women are facing higher levels of pressure than men. If men are not experiencing as high of a level of stress and pressure, it would not impact their extracurricular involvement much as it does not play as big a role in their lives.
Insight #3

Women look for career advancement opportunities in extracurriculars. Men are more socially motivated.
Overall, when it comes to extracurricular involvement, most students are looking for valuable experience and professional development (75.8%), a way to meet new people (90.8%), sense of community (75.8%), a way to have fun (76.3%), and a way to express themselves and pursue interests (65.8%). While men respondents actually report similar or ever so slightly higher preferences for these criteria, women report higher preference for skills based criteria, or things that will give them an advantage after graduating college. These include learning a new skill (69.1% women vs 55.8% men), involvements that look good on a resume (71.8% women vs 65.1% men), career advancement (44.7% women vs 39.5% men), and leadership experience (69.1% women vs 60.5% men).
Women are largely motivated by career advancement and leadership opportunities in extracurricular involvements. The majority of students are motivated to get involved with extracurriculars when it is something related to their hobbies and interests (88.7% of survey respondents) and allows them to meet new people (70% of survey respondents). However, when it comes to career advancement as a motivator, 11.5% more women respondents indicated this influences their extracurricular involvement than men. Similarly, men are motivated by leadership opportunities in extracurriculars (51.2%), but not as much as women (58.5%). Men respondents also ranked their success in college higher than women. 38.6% of men respondents strongly agreed with the statement “I feel like I have achieved success during my college career,” compared to 28.2% of women. Other survey data shows that men respondents feel less stress and worry surrounding their future, so they likely don’t focus on leadership opportunities as much because they don’t feel like they need to, and they already feel like they are very successful.
Men are More Socially Motivated

When asked about differences in motivation for academic and extracurricular commitments, survey respondents noted:

“Extracurricular activities are just for fun and do not matter much in the long run in my life, while academics have a direct impact on my future.” ~ Man, Class of 2023, School of Communications

“I have a tendency to put more emphasis on my club than my academics because it is more related to my professional development as I leave college.” ~ Woman, Class of 2020, School of Music

76.7% of men respondents reported being motivated to get involved in extracurriculars by the opportunity to spend time with friends, compared to 63.3% of women. While career opportunities are important to all students, men are often more socially motivated and focused on having fun in their extracurricular involvements than women. Women tend to view academics and extracurriculars more equally than men, due to their career influenced motivation behind involvement. When asked about differing motivation between extracurricular and academic commitments, 13.3% of men respondents noted academics as being more important than extracurriculars in their responses, compared to 7.7% of women.
While there are various differences in gender identity representation and extracurricular participation, athletics tend to be an exception. Many if not most student organizations at Ithaca College have a majority of women members, while athletics are more evenly distributed. 6.9% of women survey respondents noted participating in JV or Varsity athletics, compared to 9.3% of men. Athletics are thought of as a more stereotypically “masculine” activity in our society, and while college women are more involved overall, athletics act as more of an equal playing field for gender identity representation than other involvements.
Insight #4

Gender identity impacts the type of involvement for students who identify outside of the gender binary.
Gender identity plays the biggest role in extracurricular motivation and participation for those who identify outside of the gender binary. 100% of non-binary and transgender survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “The pressures I feel as a college student impact my level of extracurricular involvement.”

Furthermore, students who don’t identify as cisgender often seek out and are more motivated by leadership opportunities. Even more so than cisgender women, these students likely seek out these additional opportunities because they feel like they have to do more to compete with their peers and be taken seriously. 77.8% of non-binary and transgender survey respondents noted leadership opportunities as a motivator for extracurricular involvement, compared to 58.5% of women and 51.2% of men.
Non-binary and transgender students often seek out spaces with common students. This is often through membership of affinity or identity based groups, such as gender and sexuality or culture, race, and ethnicity related organizations. 44.4% of non-binary and transgender respondents noted being a member of a culture, race, or ethnicity related organization. In addition, 66.7% of non-binary and transgender respondents reported being a member of a gender or sexuality related organization, compared to only 7.3% of men. Students who don’t identify as cisgender might have a stronger affinity to these groups and specifically seek out these spaces, whereas cisgender men might not see a reason to join these groups as they are the societally accepted an often favored identity.
Survey suggests that men are less likely to participate in advocacy and social justice related extracurriculars, while non-binary and transgender students reported the highest level of involvement in these groups. Non-binary and transgender students likely have the highest participation in these organizations because they might feel a greater need to advocate for themselves or others than cisgenders students.
Key Takeaways

Analysis & Next Steps
What This Data Shows About Involvement

This research suggests that while self-identified men and women might not have drastically different reasons for initially getting involved, the level of involvement and motivation behind taking on leadership roles does vary. Women regularly expressed feeling higher levels of stress than men, as well as experiencing greater pressure to achieve perfection. This pressure permeates all aspects of the college experience, and is exemplified in student engagement through a greater number of extracurricular involvements and leadership roles. A potential explanation behind this is a feeling among college women that they not only need to do everything, but excel at everything.

Many women expressed feeling like they had to work harder than their male counterparts to achieve success in their intended career, which is likely a reason behind greater levels of extracurricular participation.
While this study is specific to Ithaca College’s campus community, it provides insights and analysis on patterns in student engagement in higher education as a whole. The full research project will incorporate qualitative research and include suggestions for improvement that could be extended to other colleges and universities. This study was designed with the hopes that it will serve as inspiration for further research in this area.
This research was conducted as part of an independent study course at Ithaca College in the Spring 2020 semester. The remainder of the semester will be dedicated to analysis of the other primary research methods used in this study: in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Both primary and secondary research will be compiled into a comprehensive research report in May 2020.
APPENDIX
The survey for this research study was administered through Google Forms.

A PDF version of the survey is available [here](#).
### Appendix B: Survey Participation by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Binary</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
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![Gender Participation Chart](image-url)
# Appendix C: Survey Participation by School

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<th>Academic School</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Business</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities and Sciences</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Sciences &amp; Human Performance</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
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![Circle chart showing survey participation by school, with the largest participation in Communications (42.2%) and the smallest in Business (6.8%).]
### Appendix D: Survey Participation by Class Year

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Class Year</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recent Alumni (2015 - 2019)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Lisa Farman, who served as my faculty advisor for this independent study and has provided continued guidance throughout the research process. This study would not have been possible without her encouragement, advice, and mentorship. Thank you for being an amazing professor and career role model!

I would like to thank Michele Lenhart and the entire Office of Student Engagement staff, past and present. Michele has been an advocate of my study from the start and played an instrumental role in helping me refine my research topic. Getting to work with you and the OSE staff has been a highlight of my time at Ithaca College!
I would like to recognize Dean Gayeski and the Roy H Park School of Communications for providing funding and support for this project. I would also like to thank Carla Golden and the Women’s and Gender Studies Department in the School of Humanities and Sciences for providing funding for this project through the Janet Kalinowski Student Development Fund.

Thank you to my family for their continued support - and special thanks to my mom for making the coffee every morning that helped keep this project going in the transition to remote instruction this semester due to COVID-19!
SOURCES
Sources


Rachel Cutsumpas
rcutsumpas@ithaca.edu
Integrated Marketing Communications
Ithaca College, Class of 2020