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Who Asked Us -- The New (Female) Nerd and the 'Gender Gap'

The new gender gap is all about attitude, says one teen. The new nerd is a hard-working girl, while boys try hard to not try too hard. That's why so many girls are achieving more than boys in high school and college.

By **Sophie Theis**, [YO! Youth Outlook Multimedia](#)

PIEDMONT, Calif. - July 21, 2006 - The nerd has persisted as a consistent character of high school practically since the invention of group education. We see him with frequency in our own lives, and in pop culture, too. The nerd reliably makes an appearance in every teen-targeted blockbuster, novel or comic. But now, the stereotypically male nerd is almost exclusively female.

No longer is nerdiness -- diligence and commitment to school -- so derogatory a characteristic. In fact, now, it is socially prized, but just in young women. Male nerds? No more.

The nation is antsy about this new trend, and so are teens. "Girls are taking over!" exclaimed my boyfriend Tom, paralleling the media's hysteria over this distinctive gap in the two genders' achievement. USA Today reported that women now comprise 57 percent of American universities.

I live in Piedmont, a teensy town surrounded by Oakland. If you imagine upper-middle class, Piedmont is easily the archetype. It's white, it's wealthy, and it's wild about success. With staggeringly high expectations for its students, at least 95 percent graduate and go to college. One would think that this positive pressure would push everybody -- both genders -- to the heights of success, but no. Not at all.

Watching Piedmont High's graduation ceremony for the class of 2006, I pondered this "gender gap." Again, the valedictorian and salutatorian were female. Yellow tassels fluttered on the caps of many more graduating senior girls than boys, indicating membership in the California Scholarship Federation. Females stood up to receive honors out of proportion to guys. On the published list of Piedmont matriculations, the most prestigious, coveted colleges are being attended by girls. The majority of the California State Universities and community colleges sit next to male names.

Females dominate the student council, clubs and projects. The grade-worriers, the note-card makers, the hour-long studiers, the highest grade-obtainers -- all female. Are girls suddenly smarter than guys? Does school just no longer work for them? No. The gender gap is all about the energy invested in school, not the intelligence.

Girls' and guys' academic attitudes vary just as much as their academic achievement does. When girls talk about grades, you hear stress and effort. They worry about competition and vocalize their anxiety over grades. When admired males talk about school, the conversation is often a contest to see who could put in the least amount of effort to do the best. Who could take a test drunk and still pull off a passing grade. Who could scratch an essay worth 15 percent of his grade during the class before. It's characterized by an ostentatious carelessness, and underscored by an implicit disdain for nerdiness. Nerdiness has become girliness, and guys don't want to be feminine.

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Success, however, is certainly not girly. Males still want and expect success, even as they disown any appearance of working for it. With hundreds of years of male-dominated society, a guy sees it as highly likely that he too will be successful; it feels almost inevitable. However, guys now see success as unrelated to academics. School feels unnecessary -- a simple, arbitrary obstacle course. To many guys, academic exertion feels too much like conformity, tolerance and obedience.

These qualities are now expected in the modern girl. As a male peer of mine said, "School doesn't cater to girls; girls cater to school." Femininity is obedience to expectations, tolerance of hard work, and willingness to work for others, all qualities that when translated to the modern classroom enable academic success. With prideful graduation ceremonies and published matriculations, my community showers girls with praise and attention for fulfilling this societal role, which is now easily quantifiable with a simple transcript, test scores and list of extra-curriculars.

This idea of wanting to make sure you're as prepared as possible for the "real world" motivates me to take advantage of the opportunities around my community. There is no guarantee that I will end up in my dream life, but I feel that I can start taking steps now to insure it by investing effort in school. I explore my community and get involved to enrich and expand my life's perspective, but I probably would not be quite as active if there did not exist such support -- and pressure -- from society. On top of all this, there is the feeling that in order to be considered equal to males, us females have to be better than them. We have to prove our worth. It's all in the outlook.

Society's pressures have created a new ideal female. Nerdiness -- caring about school -- is now mandatory for the cool female, along with the typical desired traits of attractiveness and sociability. Instead of the movies' airhead cheerleader as the popular campus queen, in the modern day, the admired female is smart, concerned about school and active in achieving her success. Now the male cares nothing about school, even if it ultimately hurts his chances at success. His new role is to be invincible to failure.

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