

Where the Boys Aren't

For young males, the drift away from academic achievement is a trend

By Robert A. Jones

OSKALOOSA, IOWA

WE ARE BOUNCING down a county highway, deep in corn country. On the right side, a Cargill plant looms out of the farmland, converting corn into corn syrup for the nation's soda pop. Otherwise the fields are fallow and all is mid-winter quiet, just the way Tom Mortenson likes it.

Mortenson is the editor and publisher of *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, a monthly newsletter, and this day he's headed for Iowa City where he will drop off the latest edition at the printer. In the field of higher education, he may be the only publisher in the land to operate out of a farm town, and the location has its drawbacks. Today's trip to the printer, all told, will take more than three hours.

"This is crazy," said Mortenson. "If I lived in a city I could do this job in ten minutes." But he is smiling in a way to suggest it is unlikely he would ever abandon southern Iowa.

Opportunity has grown in influence over the last decade as it has promoted greater access to higher education for minorities and lower-income groups. Each year it grades colleges and universities on their enrollment efforts and has not flinched from assigning low marks to some of the country's more notable institutions. On several occasions the newsletter has bestowed Harvard with an F.

But much of Mortenson's reputation, and perhaps notoriety, stems from his pioneer work on an issue he never planned to undertake: the downward spiral of academic achievement among young males, the very group that so long dominated college campuses. Beginning in 1995, Mortenson more or less announced the phenomenon to the academic world in his newsletter, and he has continued to pound away at the issue ever since.

The 1995 *Opportunity* article was titled, "What's Wrong with the Guys?" The question startled many of his readers in the education world—as it did Mortenson himself—because it was assumed that males would permanently dominate the academic world and occupy the majority position. In fact, Mortenson pointed out, men had slipped into a minority.

In the article, Mortenson argued that male dominance on campuses had been crumbling for more than a decade. His graphs, ranging from high school dropout rates to the gender ratios of college graduates, starkly defined the issue: Males were walking away from higher education in alarming numbers while females were charging ahead. Virtually every measure showed a downward curve for men that continued into the foreseeable future. There was no evidence of a turnaround.

Mortenson concluded by predicting that the abandonment of higher education by increasing numbers of males would have a profound effect on the future of the nation. "The failure of men to rise to the challenge to increase greatly their educational attainment," he wrote, "will continue to alter

nearly every aspect of our economic, social, political and family lives."

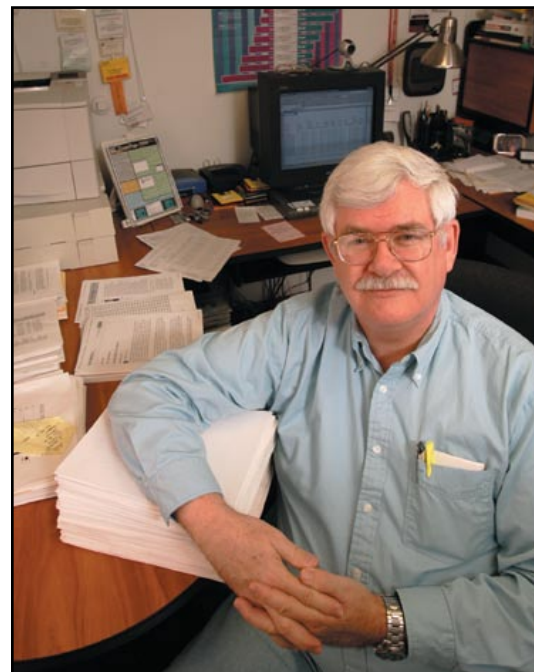
Today, the erosion of male presence on campuses is widely acknowledged by the education establishment and has been the subject of extensive media attention. Indeed, the evidence of the decline continues to be compelling and, in fact, has grown worse since Mortenson's original article.

In 2002, the most recent year for which figures are available, the percentage of male undergraduates on the nation's campuses stood at 43 percent versus 57 percent female. That figure constitutes the lowest percentage for males since the middle of the 19th century. In that same year, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to women exceeded those to men by 192,000. Between 1990 and 2002, female degrees exceeded males' by 726,000.

Though differences exist among races and ethnicities, the trend spans all groups. The sharpest drops in the share of bachelor's degrees have occurred among Hispanic males, followed by whites and African Americans. Asian American men have also lost share, though their percentages are the highest among the racial groups.

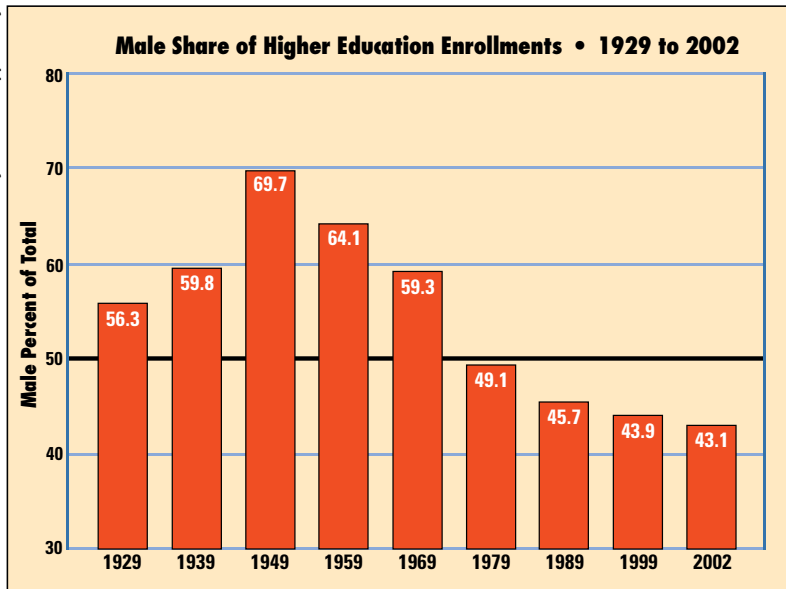
For boys, the downward spiral actually begins in middle and high school. Recent surveys have shown that boys study less than girls, make lower grades, participate in fewer extracurricular activities and take fewer college-prep courses. By the time senior year arrives, a large percentage of boys have already abandoned the college track.

In a 2003 report by the Council of Chief State School Officers, high school girls were found to be dominant even in subjects that were traditionally regarded as the preserve of boys, such as advanced math and science. In states from California to Mississippi, the majority of high school chemistry



For the last decade, Tom Mortenson has been sounding the alarm about the declining number of males on American campuses.

Recently there has been a downward spiral in college enrollment among young males, the very group that so long dominated campuses.



students were found to be girls. The same was true in trigonometry and geometry.

“Contrary to some current views and the patterns of the mid-1980s, more high school girls took higher-level math and science than did boys in all of the reporting states,” the report noted.

And just as the phenomenon begins before college, it continues after college, where women have grown to near parity with men in professional schools. A U.S. Department of Education survey recently noted that between 1970 and 2001 the percentage of law degrees awarded to women increased from five percent to 47 percent; medical degrees from eight percent to 43 percent; and dentistry degrees from one percent to 39 percent. Each year the percentages for women edge upward another notch.

“The meaning of these numbers coming out of colleges and graduate schools is very significant, and I don’t know that many people have grasped it,” said James Maxey, senior research scientist for American College Testing (ACT) in Iowa City. “We are moving towards a female dominated society in everything regarding the professions. I mean everything from the law to medicine to science, across the board.”

Here in Oskaloosa, the phone calls from reporters come almost daily now to *Opportunity’s* office in the basement of Mortenson’s home. Some come from CBS and *Newsweek*, others from small newspapers where the editor has noticed that all four high school valedictorians in his hometown happen to be girls.

Yet Mortenson is hardly satisfied. Getting the educational establishment to recognize the male decline took more than five years, he says, and even now the nation’s educational system has not begun to respond in a way

that might rescue the next generation of boys.

“You look for somebody trying to change the situation and you find nothing. Zippo,” Mortenson said. “We don’t want to

accept the idea that boys need help. The notion about boys has always been that they can take care of themselves, even when the numbers prove otherwise.”

Mortenson often expresses mild amazement that he has come to be regarded as the champion of boys. As a child of the ’60s, he grew up in rural Iowa and then spent two years in South America as a member of the Peace Corps, returning with a zeal to do good works. He had always excelled at math and eventually decided to use those skills dissecting the educational disparities between minorities and women on one side and the reigning class of white males on the other.

Over the years he worked as a policy analyst for the University of Minnesota, the Illinois Board of Higher Education and ACT. With his New Deal political idealism, Mortenson should have fit snugly into the education hierarchy. But somehow he didn’t.

Mortenson, it seems, is a born gadfly—an avuncular gadfly, with his shock of white hair and personal charm, but a gadfly nonetheless. Once engaged on a subject, he tends to talk non-stop, and the talk can grow passionate and blunt. He is also a man who quickly understands the real-world repercussions of statistics, and is impatient with those who do not. This approach does not always win favor in education bureaucracies.

At ACT, for example, he became increasingly discouraged over the erosion of the value of Pell grants for underprivileged college students. Concluding that tinkering with the program wouldn’t work, he pushed the ACT leadership to advocate the wholesale dismantling of Pell grants and then lobby for a new, more effective program. Mortenson’s bosses did not agree, and soon he departed.

The founding of *Opportunity* came, in part at least, as a result of Mortenson’s understanding that he needed a venue where his gadfly nature would be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. “With the newsletter I can lay out the numbers as I see them,” he said. “I can push the envelope; I can make people mad. And no one can bump me off.”

Then he laughed. “I don’t think they can even find me in Oskaloosa.”

Actually, Mortenson first noticed the signs of the male decline while he was at ACT, several years before he founded *Opportunity*. Initially he thought the slippage was a good sign. It meant that women—minority, white, rich and poor—were working their way toward parity.

But as he followed the numbers over the next few years, the slippage began to quicken. He pulled enrollment statistics from the ’70s and was surprised to discover that the percentage of males going to college had gone flat during the decade. “I stared at the numbers and I was startled,” he said. “For boys, the percentage was about the same in 1990 as in 1970. All the progress in higher education over those twenty years could be attributed to girls. The boys had gone flat-line.”

Still, Mortenson wrote nothing about his moment of epiphany. His franchise was minorities and women, he told himself, not males. Surely someone else would take up the cause of boys.

Five years passed and no one did. By this time, in 1995, Mortenson had started *Opportunity* and had continued to watch the decline of males. The downward curve, if anything,

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had grown steeper. Something big was happening. Mortenson began writing about it, and he hasn't stopped.

These days he travels often, addressing education conferences on the subject, and usually begins with slides showing boys' greater dropout rates, lower grades in high school, and general drift away from academic achievement. Then he puts up what he calls the "show stopper."

It's a slide of suicide rates among boys between the ages 15 and 24. The graph shows a horrific rise beginning in the 1960s and peaking in the 1990s, when the ratio of male to female suicides exceeded six to one. The rates are the highest ever recorded for that age group.

"You can sober up any audience when you lay out the suicide data," he said. "The room tends to go quiet. The audience is staring at figures showing young males giving up on life at the very beginning of life, and they understand that something dangerous is happening in our culture."

In recent years several studies by the U.S. Department of Education, the American Council on Education, and others have confirmed Mortenson's findings. But some question whether the situation amounts to a cultural apocalypse.

Michael McPherson, former president of Macalester College and now head of the Spencer Foundation, recalls that during his undergraduate days at the University of Chicago

UPDATE

A Growing Gender Gap

May 2008

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL of academic achievement among young males was already a clear trend in 2005, when *National CrossTalk* published an article about this growing gender gap in higher education. At the time, Tom Mortenson, editor and publisher of the newsletter *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, sounded a decidedly pessimistic note, and suggested that matters were likely to worsen.

The issue has continued to receive scant media attention, at best, and Mortenson has seen nothing to signal an improvement in the numbers. In fact, the trend might even have accelerated. "The girls keep pulling away from the boys," Mortenson said. "We were looking at our data, state by state, and the share of bachelor's degrees going to men is the smallest it's ever been—much less than for women."

Mortenson is a fount of information about this issue, and can provide a ready stream of data. "What seems to have happened is that, over many decades, there is a constant share of males that earn bachelor's degrees, so all the educational progress has gone to women," he said. "They started way behind men, but today there are 2.7 million more women than men in higher education."

Across the board, male participation and degree completion hovers at around 40 percent. Men hold the lead only in doctoral degrees, of which they earn slightly more than half.

Mortenson's newsletter has increased its presence on the Internet substantially in recent years, and can be found at postsecondary.org. However, interest does not seem to be building. "We have been slowly losing subscribers since about 2003," Mortenson said.

"Last year we had to redesign our website to limit access to those who support our activities—paid subscribers. But we still let media people in all the time." In part, this is the result of Mortenson's decision to forgo advertising to subsidize the website. "I was contacted early on by one of the big student loan businesses," he said. "But I decided to do it without ads."

Gender disparities in higher education are an issue outside the U.S.

as well, and Mortenson recently attended a conference in Toronto on the subject, sponsored by the Canada Millennium Scholarship foundation and the European Access Network. "So much is happening in Europe," he said. "They are experiencing the same thing. Frankly, in a majority of countries in the world, there are more women than men in higher education. The Scandinavians have the worst gender imbalance." And while the notion persists that women are disadvantaged in education, Mortenson said, "it's males who are performing poorly."

"The Europeans are not really paying attention to this either," Mortenson added. "The problem of gender politics we have in this country, as far as I can tell, exists everywhere else as well. But the data are clear—the women keep pulling farther and farther away."

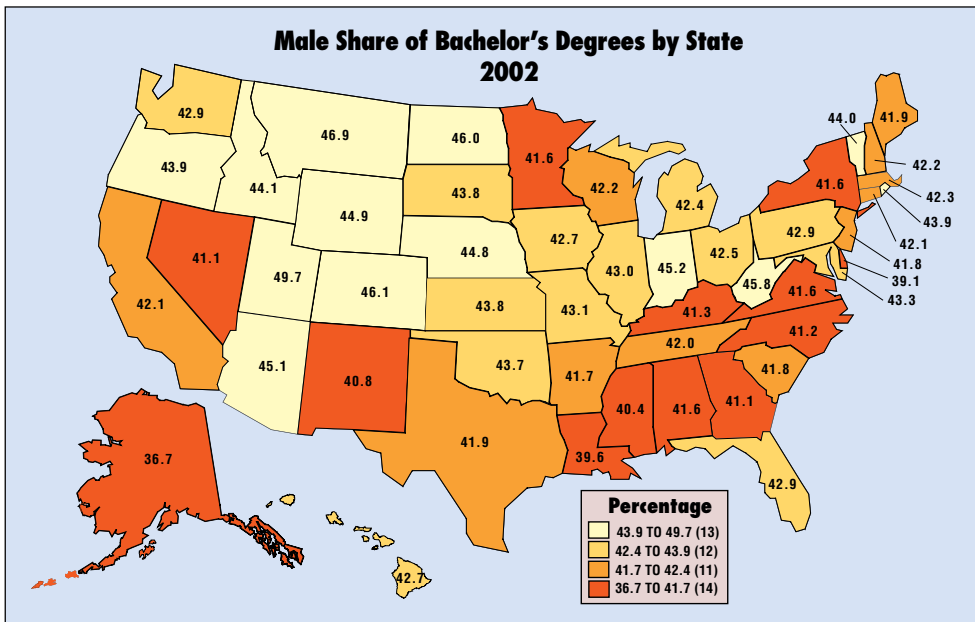
What's to be done? In Mortenson's view, women have been more successful than men in adapting to an expanding service-based economy, dominated by jobs in healthcare, business and professional services. "We are preparing our girls far better for the jobs that are out there than we are our boys," Mortenson said. "By and large, the jobs men have done continue to disappear, but the men don't seem to understand that agriculture and manufacturing are not coming back. Things can always be produced at a lower cost elsewhere in the world. There is nothing to suggest that men are going to be able to make it unless they get their act together and stay in school."

Any meaningful remedies will have to involve the K-12 system. "It's too late to practice affirmative action for boys who are already at the college level," Mortenson said. "You have to start asking why the colleges can't prepare teachers for the classroom who can engage the boys. I think it's fair to hold the colleges accountable for that."

While Mortenson's experience has made him a believer that change is possible, he has no illusions, and he remains dubious. When asked if he holds out hope for the future, his response was quick and terse. "Nope."

—Todd Sallo

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lose its attractiveness to both males and females,” said one official. “In that situation the leadership will take steps to pull in more boys, even if those steps are carried out under the table. The market realities are such that I don’t think they have a choice.”

One reason for the reluctance of colleges to discuss their tactics was described by Rebecca Zwick, of the University of California, Santa Barbara, in her recent book, “Fair Game? The Use of Standardized Tests in Higher Education.” She cites the case of the University of Georgia, which has a sizable majority of women, trying to maintain a balanced campus by giving men preference among borderline candidates. A female applicant filed a lawsuit over the practice and the university dropped it.

Zwick also refers to an annual meeting

of the National Association for College Admission Counseling where one participant referred to affirmative action for men as “the issue that dare not speak its name.”

Though the undergraduate national gender gap stands at 57 percent women, the phenomenon is not evenly distributed across all campuses. In general, small liberal arts colleges have been hit hardest by the shortage of males, and large public universities the least. That is because large public institutions usually have engineering departments, business schools, and football and basketball teams, all significant draws for men. Small liberal arts colleges often do not.

And within the liberal arts group there is a pecking order. Top-tier schools have encountered little difficulty thus far in maintaining a 50/50 balance while second- and third-tier schools have found it almost impossible. One official speculated that this might reflect an unspoken affirmative action policy on the part of first-tier schools that are admitting male students that formerly would have attended a lower-tier institution.

James Jones, president of Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, says his institution is not finding it difficult to maintain a balanced student body, in part because of Trinity’s high-level reputation and also because the college has an engineering school and specializes in business and finance.

“But when I was president of Kalamazoo we struggled to keep the student body at 55 percent women and 45 percent men,” he said. “What you will find is that any traditional liberal arts college—except those in the highest tier—are really struggling with imbalance.”

Jones points out that colleges and universities are actually caught in the middle of the problem. Males begin to drift away from academic achievement long before their college years, and their failure to earn postsecondary degrees will affect the larger culture long after the college period.

“We are looking at a very serious issue. This is a complicated, seismic shift, and the schools must address it,” Jones said. “But by ‘schools’ I do not mean just higher education. I mean from the first grade on through college.”

several decades ago, about two-thirds of the student body was male. “I don’t recall anyone going nuts over it,” he said. “I think it’s easy to look at a trend like this and overstate the repercussions. At this point we don’t really know what it means.”

Jacqueline King, director of policy analysis at the American Council on Education, would like to see the emphasis placed on minority and low-income white males. “The trend impacts all groups, that’s true, but as income rises, the gender gap decreases somewhat. Economically, if you look at the bottom rung of males, you see a truly terrible situation.”

King also argues that the shift to a female majority does not suggest that females are grabbing college spots formerly held by men. “Higher education is not a zero-sum game,” she said. “It tends to expand to accommodate new groups and larger numbers of a group such as women. Women are not taking spots away from men, they are taking advantage of an expanded pie.”

She agrees, however, that the male decline is troubling and raises many unanswered questions. When asked if she could explain why males, even those from middle and upper-middle class families, have gone into a tailspin, she replied, “No, I really don’t know the answer. I’m not sure anyone does.”

For individual colleges, the question is what, if anything, can be done to keep gender parity on their campuses. James Maxey, at ACT, says the options are fairly clear. “They can push more scholarship dollars at boys, they can practice some version of affirmative action, or they can spend more time and energy recruiting boys,” he said.

Several college officials interviewed for this story said institutions probably were utilizing all those strategies although they would be loathe to admit it. “When a college sees its gender gap getting close to 60/40, they’re going to get nervous because that’s roughly the point where the college starts to

By the time senior year arrives, a large percentage of boys have already abandoned the college track.

Jones says that he suspects the core of the problem arises from the “de-masculinizing” of boys in the early years of education when they are introduced to a matriarchal school society and forced, contrary to their nature, to sit quietly for long hours in the classroom. Boys grow up without a sense of who they are or what it means to be a man. “I guess the feminists would say that’s perfectly alright because guys have run the world for a long time,” he said. “But I don’t think it’s that simple.”

In Oskaloosa, Mortenson would applaud that conclusion. He believes boys’ drift away from college begins at an early age and has been influenced by some of the larger cultural shifts of the past few decades. Namely, millions of fathers have lost their jobs in manufacturing and agriculture, leaving them without economic purpose and unable to provide a vigorous role model for their sons. Millions of other boys have been raised in families without any father present.

“For generations, men served as the breadwinners in the family. That was their role,” said Mortenson. “Today that role has been removed. I live in one of the richest farming regions in the world, and an economist told me recently that Iowa now has two farmers per township who actually make their living from farming. Two. What about the rest of the men? I don’t think we have begun to discover what to do about men in an age when their economic purpose is being changed so profoundly.”

Over the years, as he hammered away at the issue, Mortenson has brooded on the question of who will save boys. The paradox, he says, is that men—as an interest group—have virtually no political infrastructure. In Washington, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) exercises a potent voice in support of women in higher education. But an AAUM doesn’t even exist. Nor do any other groups designed to work on behalf of male gender issues.

“Men won’t, or can’t, save themselves. That’s the sad fact,”

“We don’t want to accept the idea that boys need help. The notion about boys has always been that they can take care of themselves.”

—Tom Mortenson

said Mortenson. “They don’t have their act together, and they don’t seem engineered for that kind of effort.”

These ruminations have led Mortenson to an unexpected conclusion: Women must save men. In his view, women have their act together and can work toward change far more effectively than men.

They must realize that their own, decades-long struggle to win educational parity has succeeded beyond all expectations, and now they must lend a hand to their vanquished adversary.

Besides, he argues, women have a lot at stake in this issue. “This year approximately 200,000 more women will receive bachelor’s degrees than men,” Mortenson says. “That means 200,000 women will not find a college-educated husband to marry. Next year there will be 200,000 more, and on and on.

Women are being faced with two bad choices: not to marry at all, or marry a guy who delivers pizzas.”

In a more general sense, he argues that a culture filled with ill-educated, drifting men does not add up to a pretty picture for anyone, including women. Mortenson cites a conversation he had with the president of an historically black college where the female/male ratio had reached the startling figure of five to one.

“He was really disturbed about the environment on the campus, saying it bordered on domestic

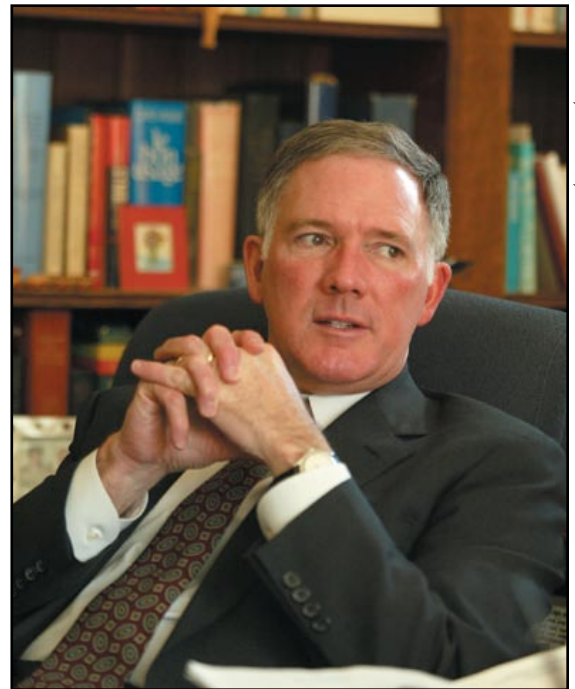
abuse,” Mortenson recalls. “The men were treating women badly, playing them off each other. Women were getting into fistfights over men. The social conditions were totally unacceptable.”

Mortenson was encouraged to hear Laura Bush’s announcement early this year that she would take on the issue of boys during the Bush second term, and he notes that it was she, not the president, who took the initiative. But even Mortenson is at a loss to describe what policy changes he would recommend to Mrs. Bush.

He toys with ideas like a return to gender-separated schools that would allow boys to operate in a more rambunctious environment. Or efforts to redefine masculinity toward the service-oriented jobs of the future. At this point, he says, no one knows what will work and what won’t.

The difficulty stems, in part, from the very scale of the issue. The unraveling of a gender involves half the population. Social issues usually arise within sub-groups and minorities whose problems are connected to their own special conditions. But a gender spans all racial groups and economic classes; it encompasses virtually every human condition.

The prospect of discovering effective antidotes is daunting, Mortenson says, and he is not optimistic about the near future. “Right now I see only the faintest response to this issue,” he said. “I am convinced that we will not see resolution in my lifetime. And I can guarantee you that it’s going to get worse before it gets better.” ♦



James Jones, president of Trinity College, believes most traditional liberal arts colleges “are really struggling with (male-female) imbalance.”

Robert A. Jones is a former reporter and columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*.