

Informed Choices: Gender Gaps in Career Advice

Yana Gallen, Assistant Professor, UChicago's Harris School of Public Policy; and Melanie Wasserman, Assistant Professor, University of California, Los Angeles

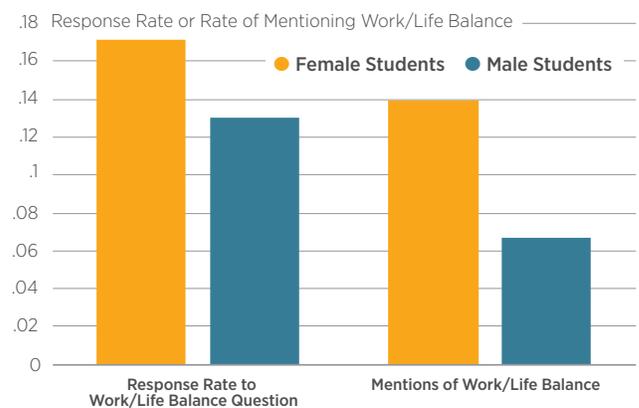
When students seek information from business professionals about careers, female students receive substantially more information on work/life balance relative to male students; in contrast, professionals mention workplace culture to male and female students at similar rates.

College students often seek information from business professionals about career choices that those professionals have made. Research has revealed that these informal exchanges are important, as they can alter students' career expectations and choices. However, do all college students receive similar responses? This working paper is a first-of-its-kind exploration into whether student gender causally affects the information that students receive regarding various career paths.

The authors implemented a large-scale field experiment wherein undergraduate students interested in learning about various careers sent messages via an online professional platform. The messages, sent by students to 10,000 randomized recipients, asked preformulated questions seeking information about the professional's career path. Four templates, based on university career center guidance, were used to test a specific hypothesis regarding whether gender influenced the type of information received by a student. The authors focused on two career attributes—work/life balance and competitive culture—both of which differentially affect the labor market choices of women.

The authors' main finding is that gender was a key determinant of the type of information that professionals provided to students regarding work/life balance. In response to the broad question about the pros/cons of the professional's field, the text of the responses reveals substantial gender disparities. Professionals are more than two times as likely to provide information on work/life balance issues to female students relative to male students.

Figure 1 • Who Hears About Work/Life Balance?



Further, when students ask specifically about work/life balance, female students receive 28 percent more responses than male students. This means that the differential emphasis on work/life balance to female students in responses to the broad question is not entirely driven by perceptions that female students care more about this issue. Interestingly, there is no differential emphasis on workplace culture to female students.

These different answers to male and female students matter: The vast majority of these mentions of work/life balance are negative and increase students' concern about this issue. At the end of the study, female students report being more deterred than male students from their preferred career path, and this is partly explained by the greater emphasis on work/life balance to female students.