Our View: Though parity is far off, engineering gender gap narrows at University of Maine

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Editorials

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An analysis shows that women are gaining ground more quickly in Orono than they are elsewhere.

Of all of the science, technology, engineering and math fields, engineering is one where women have long been underrepresented, and that remains true even today – nationally, just 20 percent of bachelor's degrees in engineering went to women in 2015. But the University of Maine is among the schools in the U.S. where women students are swiftly gaining ground, according to a recent Washington Post analysis.

The gender gap in engineering contrasts with figures on women students in other STEM fields: Over half of biology and chemistry majors are women, as are 45 percent of math and statistics majors. What keeps women from majoring in engineering? Frequently mentioned as obstacles are factors such as discomfort at being outnumbered in class, lack of confidence in their abilities, a dearth of role models in the field and bias on the part of classmates and even professors.

But women are breaking barriers at several of the nation's top colleges and universities, the Post found. In 2015, over half of the bachelor's degrees in engineering at MIT went to women; the same was true at Dartmouth College this year.

The University of Maine doesn't stand out in terms of the percentage of women in its nationally prominent engineering program. UMaine has reason, though, to be proud of how fast things are changing there.

Women made up 20.4 percent of UMaine's engineering graduates in 2015 – an increase of 9.2 percent over 2010 and the second-largest five-year gain of the 90 public programs analyzed by the Post. (The University of Connecticut, with a 9.3 percent 2010-2015 gain, was at the head of the pack.)

Private schools have an advantage over public ones as they try to diversify engineering classes, the Post said. They have far lower enrollment, which means that smaller gains in the number of women in a class are more likely to tip the balance. And these institutions attract huge pools of qualified applicants who have the educational background – and possibly the attitude – to brush off snubs that might intimidate other young women.

But while public institutions have been moving more slowly toward parity, they've discovered effective ways to get there: focusing on the impact of research on humanity, for example, as opposed to "just doing science to do science," in the words of University of Virginia engineering researcher Pam Norris.

This strategy dovetails well with the findings of a first-of-its-kind federal study, released earlier this year, which concluded that eighth-grade girls are better than boys at thinking through problems and using technology to solve them. Let's hope that by the time these girls are considering higher education, they'll feel more welcome in engineering classrooms in Maine and around the nation.

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