Explaining the Academic Gender Gap: Comparing Undergraduate and Graduate/Faculty Beliefs about Talent Required for Success in Academic Fields

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The persistent gender imbalance in many academic fields has been the topic of much recent research. One recent study found that when graduate students and faculty of a given field believe that their field requires talent for success, male students tend to be overrepresented in that field. This, in conjunction the persistent stereotype that women have less innate talent, was proposed to cause fewer women to pursue disciplines believed to require more talent. It has yet to be established, however, whether those field-specific beliefs are shared by the undergraduate population, where they can play a role in the decisions made by undergraduates. Without this established, it seems pre-mature to propose a causal connection between how women tend to select disciplines and these field-specific beliefs by those within the field. Using a large survey of undergraduates, this study aims to determine whether undergraduate beliefs about which fields of study require talent for success matches the attitudes of those within those fields. This study also examines whether a student’s degree of exposure to and familiarity with a discipline leads him or her to more closely share the opinion of those within the discipline. These findings will help direct future research to ask the right questions and propose plausible hypotheses about gender imbalance in academia.

Keywords: gender imbalance, gender gap, talent, academia, undergraduate, survey, aptitude, innate, beliefs.