

River Valley Community College looks to increase male enrollment, close gender gap

Posted: Saturday, March 22, 2014 8:00 am

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When Alicia B. Harvey-Smith came to River Valley Community College last year, she said she wanted to use data to guide a review of the community college's academics, demographics and finances.

Last fall, when administrators looked through enrollment figures at the school, a question emerged that they couldn't ignore:

Where are the young men? And why aren't they going to community college?

Women outnumber men on colleges around the country. But at River Valley, the numbers don't just tilt in favor of women, they topple over.

Last fall, there were 1,030 students enrolled in River Valley courses. Of those, only 310, or 30 percent, were men.

"We know that there are men in our communities that need education and training," Harvey-Smith said. "It's really part of our mission to educate everyone in our region who needs it."

To that end, River Valley wants to expand its program mix to include more male-friendly courses, while breaking down other barriers, such as cost, that may keep men away from the classroom. And through it all, the college will be asking men what programs or services they want to see more of.

River Valley is based in Claremont and has a Keene Academic Center. Its catchment area for students extends throughout much of the western part of the state.

Nationally, the community college population is 57 percent women, 43 percent men, and within the Community College System of New Hampshire, the population is similar, at 56 percent female.

River Valley's percentage of male students placed last among the seven schools in the system for the past eight years. In fact, the only year when it came close to another school's was fall 2007, when White Mountains Community College's student population was 30 percent male and River Valley's was 26 percent.

The gap between men and women at River Valley spanned at least 36 percentage points in every year since 2006. And in 2006, when the percentage of men was the lowest it's been in recent years, the student population was more than three-fourths female. Men represented a mere 22 percent of students.

Harvey-Smith said it's difficult to pinpoint a specific explanation for the gap, since economic, social and cultural factors all influence whether a person chooses to pursue community college courses.

The college should start by breaking its numbers down, said Kent Phillippe, associate vice president of research and student success at the American Association of Community Colleges.

Community colleges have such diverse student bodies that it'd be interesting to see if the gap varies among age groups, he said. Are fewer male workers returning to community college than women? Or are fewer male high school graduates enrolling in courses than women?

Often, the number of males starts dropping off even before college, Phillippe said. There are more female high school graduates and more females in high school who say they plan to attend college.

That's the case in New Hampshire, where in 2011, 89 percent of the high school graduating class was female and 83 percent was male. Of that class, 18 percent of males said they planned to join the workforce, join the armed services or hadn't made plans, compared to 10 percent of female students.

As the workforce grows more complex, workers are going to need a higher level of training to secure jobs that pay a livable wage, and males are a part of that workforce, he said.

But it's important to make sure the gender gap doesn't close through a drop in female students, Phillippe said.

Harvey-Smith agreed, saying she wants to implement strategies that will maintain the number of women while increasing the number of men.

As part of a system-wide push to boost enrollment, River Valley is aiming to increase its population by 2 percent to 3 percent every year of the next five years. Within that goal, Harvey-Smith would like to see the number of male students climb by 3 percent within the next two years.

One strategy River Valley is already testing is offering more programs that are either gender-neutral or will attract more male students.

Historically, River Valley's program offerings have skewed toward allied health programs such as nursing, medical assistants and social work, which tend to attract more female students, Harvey-Smith said.

But now the school is focusing on expanding courses offered in newer programs such as criminal justice and cyber security. The school's certificate program in advanced machine tool technology, also relatively new, has also helped River Valley enroll more males.

Of course, there are women who excel in all of those programs, but cyber security, computer technology and advanced machine tool all have a majority male makeup, Harvey-Smith said. Some small programs — advanced accounting, computer networking and web site design — have 100 percent male enrollment right now.

River Valley also is developing a pre-engineering program Harvey-Smith hopes will join the list of programs that attract male students this fall.

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