

Young Women and Elective Office:  
Running and Winning on a College Campus

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There are more than 4,100 colleges and universities in the United States, and almost all have an undergraduate student governing body such as a student government or student association. With women attending college at rates equal to or greater than men (Lewin 2006) and participating in political activities at higher rates than at any other time in history (Conway 2005), it is time to understand how college women engage in politics. Currently, there is very little research that examines how and if young women choose to participate in politics at the college level and if they face challenges when they do so. It is possible that the same barriers women face at the local state and national level may also impact college women's decision to participate in politics and may indicate greater need for programs that foster political engagement at the college level and encourage its continuation after graduation.

#### *Political Barriers and Successes*

Women have experienced a long struggle for political equality in the United States. They were not given the right to vote until 1920, and even then states blocked women from other means of political participation including serving on juries or holding elective or appointed office (McBride-Stetson 2004). The first woman was elected to Congress in 1917 (Seltzer, Newman, and Voorhees Leighton 1997, 75), but to date, only 35 women have served in the Senate (Center for American Women and Politics 2007b). Currently, 23 percent of state legislators are women, 24 percent of state executive positions are filled by women, and 16 percent of Congress is women (Center for American Women and Politics 2007a).

Despite these dishearteningly low numbers, recent research finds that when women run for office, they win at the same rate as their male counterparts (Seltzer, Newman and Voorhees Leighton 1997, 79; Women and Elective Office 2005, 9). Additionally, women candidates raise as much money as men to finance their campaigns (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2007, 174;

Burrell 2005; Fiber and Fox 2005). In fact, in the 2004 congressional elections, data suggested that “female candidates raised more money than their male colleagues in every single type of race” (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2007, 174). This indicates that, at least when it comes to fundraising, women have found ways to level the playing field.

However, as successful as women are when they run for office, women continue to be less likely to run than men. There are several reasons to explain the gender differences in office-seeking behavior, including the structure of the US electoral system, electoral variables like fundraising and media coverage, and personal factors, such as family life. First, the electoral system in the United States contributes to this problem. Over the last fifty year, incumbent members of the House have had a 95.3 percent success rate (Palmer and Simon 2006, 36). Incumbents are more likely to win because they have more name recognition, an established fundraising apparatus, and other advantages at their disposal (Palmer and Simon 2006, 36). When women themselves are incumbents, it appears that they win at exactly the same rates as their male incumbent counterparts (Seltzer, Newman, and Voorhees Leighton 1997, 82; Palmer and Simon 2006). In fact, “female House incumbents do slightly better; their overall reelection rate is 95.6 percent compared to 94.8 percent for men” (Palmer and Simon 2006, 126). However, because there are currently so few women in office, they are more likely to be challengers than incumbents. And when women incumbents run for re-election, they are much more likely than men to have opposition” (Seltzer, Newman, and Voorhees Leighton 1997, 83), making it difficult for women to win elections, even when they have the incumbent advantage.

In addition to the US electoral system, several other electoral variables stymie women’s candidacies for elective office. First, the political environment, which revolves around hierarchy, competition, and an elaborate “old boys’ network,” can be difficult for women to

navigate. Where men have the luxury of a variety of mentors, female mentors are harder to find (Eagly and Carli 2004). Second, women report that while they can raise as much money as men do, they have to work harder to do it. This is most likely a factor of the electoral system which makes it more difficult for challengers to garner wide financial support (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2007, 174). Because women are more likely to be challengers and challengers have greater difficulty raising money, women candidates find it more difficult to raise money than do men. Women are also more likely to rely on individual donors, rather than political action committees (Thomas and Wilcox 2005, 10) often due to the fact that PAC contributions are more likely to be given to candidates with greater seniority, candidates that tend to be male (Ferrar-Myers 2003). In addition, when women do receive money from PACs, it is generally from organizations that specifically give money to women candidates like EMILY's List (Francia 2001). This seed money is vital because it is used to hire staff, conduct polls, and establish the foundation for the campaign (Francia 2001). Without the money, candidates are at a distinct disadvantage.

The electoral environment may also discourage women from running for office. For example, the media covers women differently than they do men. It tends to focus more on women's appearance, marital status, or family life than on more substantive policy matters (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2007, 171; Niven and Zilber 2005). When Geraldine Ferraro ran for vice president, the newspapers asked, "What if she is supposed to push the button to fire the missiles and can't because she's just done her nails?" (White House Project 2000). In Elizabeth Dole's run for president in 1999, she received considerably more personal coverage than any of the male candidates and less issue coverage (White House Project 2000). This type of media

treatment can be frustrating to women candidates because they may feel like what they say and the policy work that they do is not taken seriously.

The media may also question whether women candidates can be good mothers and good candidates at the same time. Women also tend to receive more negative media coverage than their male counterparts, leaving them open to increased criticism the minute they declare their candidacy (Fridkin and Woodall 2005; Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2007; Fox 1997). These very personal, potentially very negative, critiques on personal life and appearance may discourage women to run. They may be unwilling to open themselves up to criticisms or to subject their family to the intense scrutiny that may come along with a campaign.

Additionally, the public perceives women differently than they perceive men. Voters are more likely to say they would vote for a woman than in the past (Kennedy 2005), but public opinion still creates obstacles for women to overcome. Voters tend to stereotype women as kinder, more passive, and warmer than male candidates who are viewed as powerful, direct and knowledgeable (Dolan 2005). As a result, some voters will not elect women because they perceive them to lack these important leadership skills. In fact, people do have the tendency to view men as intrinsically better leaders (Eagly and Carli 2004; Kennedy 2005). In historically male dominated roles like political office, women are seen as inexperienced and therefore as ineffective leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002).

Women's behavior is analyzed by the public more than that of men. According to a 2002 study by the White House Project, "Women candidates, especially for executive office, are often judged differently and more harshly than male candidates. A challenging double standard exists for women, especially on the dimension of effectiveness and strength" (White House Project 2002). For example, when presented in exactly the same way as a male candidate, the female

candidate was viewed as less effective and less tough. More than men, women must show a proven record of success and achievements and come across as serious and direct in order to be viewed as effective leaders by the public (White House Project 2002). But women's behavior must also strike a fine balance: Women who take on masculine qualities to be efficient leaders are demonized, while women who express especially feminine attributes were also viewed as poor leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002).

There are also many personal factors that contribute to women's decisions not to run for office. Women are less likely than men to consider themselves "qualified" to run for office (Lawless and Fox 2005). In fact, "men are nearly twice as likely as women to consider themselves 'very qualified' to seek an elective position," and women, even those with advanced academic degrees and experience equal to that of their male counterparts, are much more likely to rate themselves as "not at all qualified" (Lawless and Fox 2005, 98). Women are also less likely to believe that they would be able to win their first campaign (Lawless and Fox 2005, 98). This lack of internal sense of possibility is compounded by the fact that women are less likely to have been asked or to have it suggested that they run for office, especially by formal political actors (Lawless and Fox 2005, 78). And since women are unlikely to consider running for office without anyone encouraging them to do so, this lack of recruitment of women candidates can create vast gender disparities in the candidate pool (Lawless and Fox 2005, 93).

Finally, gender divisions of private labor in society, such as women bearing the greater burden of child-care responsibilities, make women less interested in running for office (Fulton 2006, 235). In fact, their interest is inversely related to the percentage of household tasks that they are responsible for at home (Lawless and Fox 2005, 67). And when it comes to balancing their work and family lives, "Women who enter politics tend to face closer scrutiny and are

forced to reconcile their familial and professional roles in a way that men are not” (Lawless and Fox, 2005, 52). Women may also view politics as a “dirty game, and their loftier standards may keep them away from the grit and grind of it” (Hunt 2007, 109).

The dearth of women candidates at all levels of politics is problematic for a number of reasons. First, women elected officials are much more likely than men to advocate for women’s issues in legislation, such as healthcare or women’s equality (Swers and Larson 2005). “Women legislators of both parties are more likely to advance ‘women’s issues,’ define women’s issues more broadly than men, put them at the top of their legislative agendas, and to take a leadership role in those issue areas. This results in bills dealing with children, education, and health care becoming legislative priorities.” (O’Connor 2003). Women not only impact the types of issues discussed, but also influence what direction the debate on topics might take. Levy, Tien and Aved (2001) discuss the abortion issue as an example of women’s participation in the political process changing the way that their male colleagues think about and legislate on issues of importance to women. Previously, male legislators had talked about abortion in terms of the life of the fetus and morality. Debates revolved around fetal viability and religion. With the participation of women, the debate shifted to focus on the effect that pregnancy and abortion have on the mothers and their existing families.

Additionally, differences in women’s leadership styles influence the way that the legislative body is run. Women tend to emphasize collaboration over hierarchy and to facilitate interaction among their colleagues, rather than trying to control the debate (O’Connor 2003). Women legislators are more responsive to constituent requests, taking on more casework and working harder to find positive resolutions (O’Connor 2003). Women and the transformational role they play have become integral to the success of Congress.

To combat the problem of small numbers of women candidates, several training programs have been started around the country to encourage women's political involvement. These programs recognize that there are electoral challenges for women that they may not be able to change. Instead, these program attempt to changes women's personal factors that may make them unwilling to run by educating them, providing them with encouragement and mentoring, and asking them to run.

The Woman's Campaign Forum is one such organization.<sup>1</sup> This non-partisan, not-for-profit conducts the "She Should Run" campaign to recruit women leaders to run for office. Knowing that women are more likely to run if asked, they feel this is an important step to getting more women into elective office. Once a woman decides she wants to run, the organization conducts training programs that bring together experts in the field to provide women the tools they need to succeed. They provide basic candidate training about how to decide to run, fundraising, balancing work and family life and developing a campaign staff. They also conduct training for women public officials to help elected officials advance their careers and gain leadership positions.

Another non-partisan organization conducting this work is the National Women's Political Caucus, an organization dedicated to increasing women's participation in the political process.<sup>2</sup> NWPC has been recruiting, training and supporting pro-choice women candidates for elected and appointed offices at all levels of government regardless of party affiliation for over 35 years. NWPC offers campaign training for candidates and campaign managers to develop practical skills to help women win.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wcfonline.org/index.asp>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nwpc.org/>



Partisan organizations have also developed to recruit and train women from specific parties to run for office. EMILY's List<sup>3</sup> and WISH List<sup>4</sup>, originally formed as PACs to raise money for Democratic and Republican women candidates respectively, now have trainings for candidates and campaign operatives to improve their skills and make it more likely that women will win.

EMILY's List was formed in 1985 to help raise money for women candidates who traditionally had a harder time fundraising than their male counterparts. Before its founding in 1985, no Democratic woman had ever been elected to the Senate in her own right. There were only 12 women in the House. In 1986, EMILY's List helped Barbara Mikulski of Maryland become the first Democratic woman to be elected to the Senate in her own right. Since then, Mikulski has served for more than twenty years, EMILY's List's membership has helped to elect more than 69 Democratic pro-choice women of Congress, 12 Senators and eight Governors, and the membership has grown from 1,155 to more than 100,000. EMILY's List developed as a successful PAC by bundling donations from members to be sent to women candidates. In the 2006 election cycle alone, EMILY's List members raised over \$11 million for pro-choice Democratic women at all levels of government and in all areas of the country and is now considered the largest political action committee in the country.

In 2001, EMILY's List started the Political Opportunity Program (POP) to recruit, encourage, support, and train pro-choice Democratic women who are thinking of running for office for the first time and incumbent officeholders facing tough challenges. POP staff members, experienced in the political area, help the candidates prepare for the "professional, mental, physical, and emotional aspects of running for office." This program works under the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.emilyslist.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thewishlist.org/>

knowledge that one of the main reasons that women do not run for office is because they have not been asked to do so, and so the program provides the encouragement that these women would normally not receive. They also provide advice to women in office to help them gain the skills they will need to move into higher leadership positions within their legislatures.

WISH List works in a similar way. The organization was formed in 1992 to raise money to identify, train, support and elect more Republican women leaders to public office at all levels of government. Since the organizations formation, the number of pro-choice Republican women in the U.S. Senate has quadrupled and the number of pro-choice Republican women in the U.S. House has seen a 50 percent increase. WISH List, too, has established a training program, called the Tillie Fowler Campaign Training Program. Started in 2001, this program provides candidates and campaign staff “advice on campaign strategy, polling, grassroots organization and fundraising from top national campaign experts.” Much like EMILY’s List, WISH List believes that there efforts have led to increased numbers of women in elected office and that this is a positive step for American politics.

### *Young Women and Politics*

A study by Lawless and Fox (2005) found that women under 40 are less likely to have considered running for office than have women over 40. In general, youth are less likely to participate in government than other age groups. Youth electoral participation has steadily declined since they were first given the right to vote, primarily because “young people feel they can do little to affect elections and a substantial number believe that it might even be difficult to learn how, when and where to vote” (Marcelo, Lopez, and Kirby 2007). In 2004, nearly half of young people reported voting “seldom” or “never” (The Pew Research Center). Most young people, both men and women, identified as “disengaged” in 2006 (Marcelo, Lopez, and Kirby

2007). However, the number of young people voting in presidential elections has risen in the past few election cycles (Marcelo, Lopez, and Kirby 2007). Young people are generally positive about the US government, but are skeptical about whether elected officials really care what they think. “Young people, regardless of gender, see politics as something that old white men do, and not something that they themselves would be interested in. Overwhelmingly, unless specifically told otherwise, young people immediately use the national level as a referent for the term ‘politics’ and associations with politics at the national level are nearly wholly negative” (Lake Snell Perry & Associates 2000). Because of this association between politics and negativity, it may be difficult to encourage women to see national politics as something meant for them.

College students are more likely than their non-college counterparts to show “higher levels of civic involvement, electoral participation, and political voice across several measures” (Lopez and Elrod 2006). Young women who are current college students surpass all other groups of young people on measures of volunteering and voting (Lopez and Elrod 2006). And young women are actually more likely to vote than young men, “with 72.5 percent of young women reporting that they were registered to vote in 2004” (Marcelo, Lopez, and Kirby 2007). Young women and men are similar in civic engagement, but young men tend to pay closer attention to the news and politics than young women, similar to differences found in their adult counterparts (Jenkins 2005). Other studies are less optimistic, finding that college women are overall less interested in politics than men; they discuss politics less than men and follow political campaigns less than men (Bernstein 2005, 305). It appears that the young women poised to benefit most from the gains of the women’s rights movement in their ability to run for office and engage in politics are even less interested in running for political office than were their mothers (Lawless and Fox 2005).

This disinterest in politics unfortunately appears to translate to women's participation in college politics as well. The little research available has found that women are just as underrepresented in their undergraduate student governments (USGs) as they are at all other levels of government. One study suggests that women make up only 29 percent of USG presidents and only 26 percent of USG vice presidents (Miller, Carol, and Krause 2004). It is unclear, however, why these low rates occur.

College women typically do not face many of the institutional barriers that their adult women counterparts do. First, incumbency is not an issue since candidates must run every year, and rarely are students eligible to run for more than four years in a row. Electoral structures in college usually involve multi-candidate "districts" (e.g. having five senators for each class and five at-large). This means that there is not the winner-take-all model of elections that hinders women's ascension in national politics. Second, because of the short duration and inexpensive nature of college elections, college women do not face the same fundraising challenges. Campaigns usually run one to three weeks, eliminating the need for expensive advertising strategies or the need to take time off work to campaign. College campaign finance regulations usually cap spending at a very modest amount, making a candidate more likely to call their parents for the extra cash than to solicit their future constituents for donations.

Third, women in undergraduate institutions are less likely to be concerned about how campus media might affect their campaigns. Because of the smaller constituencies and territories covered by USG campaigns, campus media is less likely to play a significant role in covering candidates and their campaigns. Campus newspapers are less likely to publish stories about candidates, and candidates are less likely to be photo graphed, to have detailed policy platforms or to have family lives to analyze. Necessarily, newspaper coverage will be less

gendered. Students will also be less likely to rely on the student newspaper or TV station to make up their minds about whether to vote for a particular candidate. Thus, even if gender discrimination persists in campus media, it is unlikely to have a major impact on student voting patterns.

There may, however, be barriers that women in undergraduate election may experience. Barriers to participation in USGs may come from the candidates themselves, campaign logistics, or demographics of their university. Research indicates that young women do not describe themselves as politically active, even though they may participate in student organizations, activism or volunteerism around political issues (Taft 2006). Teenage girls especially tend to reject the idea of politics, but still get active in politics in other ways. Jessica Taft argues that these young women reject calling themselves political as a protest against the “dirtiness” of politics. This rejection of political participation is reminiscent of adult women’s failure to self-identify as someone qualified to run for office (Lawless and Fox 2005). It is possible that until young women identify themselves as in a position to be successful in politics, gender disparities in USGs will persist.

Another barrier comes in the form of lack of information about how to run for office. “Young people and particularly young women maintain that they would not know how to get involved even if the desire was there. They severely lack role models, mentors, and even a sense of where to go to learn how to enter politics” (Lake Snell Perry & Associates 2000, 18). It may be that women are just not aware of the opportunities around them or unable to find ways to tap into a complicated-seeming system. On college campuses, this problem is made worse by the difficulties of advertising about informational meetings or the relative lack of information about opportunities to get involved in student government.

Additionally, undergraduate elections may allow campaign tactics that are unappealing to women. For example, male candidates' use of sexual innuendo on campaign posters (e.g. one candidate for an USG with the last name Johnson ran a campaign demanding that people "Vote for the Big Johnson") may create a hostile environment for female candidates, discouraging them from entering the field. On some campuses, elections are seen as popularity contests or battles to see who can have the funniest campaign materials, a prospect that many young women may find discouraging.

However, young women tend to insist that they would not run for office, but still maintain some curiosity about holding elective office. While only 6% of women claim to be very interested in running, 43% of young women say that they would "think, even a little bit, about running for any level of elected office including local or community office" (Lake Snell Perry & Associates 2000, 20). And young women do show a willingness to get involved in politics if they feel they can make a positive change. While many young women express distaste for the government, they are still interested in government and are hopeful that things could improve with the right leadership. They believe, overwhelmingly, that having more young people would make the country better and that having more women in office would make things better (Lake Snell Perry & Associates 2000, 25). Also, it appears that women who are more aware of issues that affect women are more likely to be interested in politics. "Women with higher awareness of gender inequality tend to be more politically engaged than their less aware peers...increased awareness of gender inequality does seem to be a motivating factor for women to participate in politics" (Bernstein 2005, 307).

Those women who are interested in running for office are distinct from young women in general. They are generally full-time college students and have parents who vote in every

election (Lake Snell Perry & Associates 2000, 21). These women feel that they can find solutions to problems they see in their communities, pay attention to politics, and have faith in the ability of government to solve social problems (Lake Snell Perry & Associates 2000, 21). They are often “motivated to consider running for office by the potential that they may bring something different to the table by participating” (Smith 2006, 23).

But even if young women are interested in running for office, they may require additional support to be convinced that running is the right choice for them. This support may include the presence of mentors and role models, practical instructions and training on how to run for office, and awareness of opportunities and of those who have had successful campaigns in the past (Lake Snell Perry & Associates 2000, 27). “Women who have had leadership experiences and have been encouraged to seek political office are far more likely than women who have not had these experiences to express an interest in running. Indeed, more than any other factor, encouragement has twice the impact of any other in predicting whether young women would consider running for office. This suggests there is certainly potential to cultivate a pipeline of future women political leaders” (Lake Snell Perry & Associates 2000, 19).

Several programs teach youth to build leadership skills and get involved in politics. Some organizations offer issue-specific leadership training for youth. For example, Greenpeace offers “Change It,”<sup>5</sup> a grassroots education training in which students learn to organize and make policies around environmental issues. The training is based more on leadership skills than running for office. One example of an organization that trains students specifically to run for student government is Young People For (YP4),<sup>6</sup> a branch of the People For the American Way Foundation. YP4 partners with the United States Student Association to train its young adult

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.changeit07.com/about/program-info>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.youngpeoplefor.org/leadership/studentgovt/>

fellows, both men and women, to “engage in effective messaging, develop campaign strategies, improve public speaking skills, and implement successful marketing strategies in their bids for elected student government offices.” This program also provide training, mentorship and financial support for their Fellows. EMILY’s List conducts a campaign training program for recent college graduates that teaches them how to work on a campaign and then places them on the staff of a woman candidate’s election campaign.

Other programs are specifically geared towards young women. The White House Project<sup>7</sup> conducts day-long trainings called “boot camps” to give women in-depth knowledge on a specific area of expertise and break down some of the larger barriers for women seeking office. The boot camps are generally directed towards a particular issue or field of politics that women may be interested in.

While several programs have sought to train women in specific political skills and to involve them in politics at the local, state and national levels, few programs have focused on encouraging women to participate in politics on the college level. In fact, American University currently appears to be the only university in the country that holds a training program for undergraduate women to teach them how to run for undergraduate student government. The day-long program, called Campaign College: AU Women to Win,<sup>8</sup> focuses on peer mentorship and hands-on experience to increase women’s involvement in the student government.

Unfortunately, unlike EMILY’s List and other organization’s work with women, little research has been done on the topic of young women’s political ambition and what factors play a role in whether young women run for office, especially at the undergraduate level. It is unclear what special needs that young women may have. There is little more than anecdotal evidence of

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thewhitehouseproject.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.wandp.american.edu/>



women's under-representation in USGs and what the implications of women's low participation are in USGs across the country.

And the evidence is even less conclusive when it comes to young women's experiences with politics. Little work has been done to determine which college environments are the most or least conducive to women's involvement. It is possible that certain factors in the schools they attend, such as student body makeup or culture, may play a role. The current research seeks to take a first look at just a few of these factors.

In addition, there has been little focus on the young women themselves. Aside from a single study conducted by the White House Project, there has been no other research that has allowed women to speak openly about their experiences. Finally, few researchers have attempted to see which methods are most effective in helping young women run for and win positions in their USGs. We must attempt to see what women find appealing and appalling about politics and what they feel is necessary to win, so that we can provide them with the resources they need to run and win elections, even at the undergraduate level.

This research seeks to close some of the information gaps that exist in the study of young women's political ambition. It will explore at what rate women are participating in USGs and what characteristics of undergraduate institutions influence this participation. Additionally, a case study of one young women's campaign training program will examine why women do or do not run and what they think the barriers to running might be.

#### *Women and Undergraduate Student Government: National Assessment*

The first goal of this research was to determine what factors in undergraduate institutions lead to women's increased participation in USGs. To do so, we examined the top twenty universities and the top twenty liberal arts colleges in the country, according to the US News and

World Report rankings for 2007. After examining the schools and noticing the dearth of public universities in the highest ranks, we chose to expand the top twenty universities to the top fifteen public and the top fifteen private universities. Military schools and the all-women colleges were eliminated from the list of liberal arts colleges as their gender composition and different structures would have made comparisons between schools difficult.

For each school we recorded the number of students, percentages of men and women attending the school, number of men and women executive branch members and number of men and women legislative branch members of the USG, and the gender of the president, vice president, secretary and treasurer of the USG. Data was gathered from a number of sources. Gender compositions of the schools were gathered from the schools' websites. Information about the USG and some demographic information about the school were compiled from [asgaonline.com](http://asgaonline.com), an online database of USGs across the United States. When gender compositions could not be found, the Equality In Athletics website was consulted.<sup>9</sup> Estimates for the man/woman ratios in the USGs were obtained by looking at the first names and, occasionally, pictures of students posted on the USG website. If the gender of the student was unclear, the student was labeled "unknown" and not included in the ratio. These "unknown" students made up approximately 8.3% of the students.<sup>10</sup>

We found distinct disparities between men and women in USGs. Taking all schools into account, women made up about 42 percent of executives and 41 percent of legislators. Within the executive branch, women made up 21.05% of presidents, 51.61% of vice presidents, 45.45% of treasurers, and 58.33% of secretaries.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://ope.ed.gov/athletics/Search.asp>

<sup>10</sup> Due to time restraints, the schools were not called to confirm the genders of the unknown students. Future research should do so.

Women were more likely to participate in USGs at public universities (45.80 percent of the executives and 46.82% of the legislators) than at private universities (40.42 percent of the executives and 38.11 percent of the legislators).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

They are also more likely to participate at the universities (43.76 percent of executives, 42.92 percent of legislators) than at liberal arts colleges (39.38 percent executives, 38.22 percent legislators).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

### *Campaign College: A Case Study*

Having gathered information about the schools, we also wanted to gain insight into the young women themselves and to give them a chance to explain their experiences in their own voices. With so few studies focusing on college women's experiences with politics and running for office, there is little data to indicate why women do or do not choose to run for office at the undergraduate level.

Here we conducted a case study of the participants from the American University Campaign College: AU Women to Win. The program provides students with the necessary leadership skills to be involved in campus politics and hopes to inspire future women candidates for local, state and national office. Campaign College is an intensive, one day training on AU's campus in which students learn the structure of student government and how to assemble a campaign staff, develop and communicate an effective message, outreach to the campus community and mobilize voters. As far as we know, this training is the first on a college campus specifically directed at women with the goal of increasing women's participation in USGs.

Sixteen women and seven men attended the program in 2007. Men were included in the sample because the campaign training, while directed at women candidates, was open to both men and women, as per university requirements. Men participated in the program both as candidates and campaign staff members. We surveyed the participants before the training and again after the USG election (See Appendix A for survey questions).

On the pre-training survey, we had three specific areas of interest. First we wanted to explore why student found politics attractive or unattractive. The women had a variety of reasons for their interest in politics. Many of the women named a specific person who inspired them to get involved in politics, like John F. Kennedy or their Government teacher. Others named an awareness of politics' ability to change society for the better. For example, one woman explained that, "I got interested in politics because a lot of people from my background have real lives less fortunate than mine has been. I want to represent my native home and seek to better their lot in life." A senior said, "I've been interested in issues of particular concern to women since middle school, and got a feel for how lobbying and campaigns were able to affect historical changes and moved forward equality."

Overwhelmingly, however, women pinpointed growing up in an environment that encouraged political engagement as a catalyst for their own interest. One freshman woman noted that, "My grandmother was the mayor of her town (Newark, Ohio). Her stories and experiences inspired me to get involved in politics. I want to change the world even if only in a small way." Another freshman woman explained that "I grew up in a very politically aware family. My grandma and dad always debated Democrat v. Republican viewpoints. Every Sunday morning, I ate breakfast with shows like *Meet the Press* on TV. This environment rubbed off on me." These women seemed to view their families' involvement in politics as a

normalizing factor; their families' approach to politics made it something normal for the women to do as well.

When asked what they liked about politics, the women once again expressed interest in helping other people. One woman explains, "The idea of public office is appealing because it's a concrete way to give back to one's community and make an impact." Another states, "Basically, I like the possibility for significant change that it can bring. This is probably idealistic in reality, but changes are possible" and that "I love that decisions in politics can truly help improve the lives of citizens, both domestically and globally." These women also expressed an interest in the type of dialogue that is fostered in the political arena. Says one freshman woman, "I love the debates. Everyone has their opinions and can come together although not always peacefully, to discuss them and solve or fix the problems in our system." Another woman notes that "I like the opportunity that politics opens up for very diverse groups of people to share ideas and opinions and make contribution to society. Through politics, many ideas can be discussed and a broad range of solutions may arise for a problem."

Many of the women also liked the idea of the political "game." They expressed an interest in the fast-paced environment and the system of making laws. Several women expressed interest in campaigning and governmental decision making.<sup>11</sup>

We also asked the participants to name things about politics that they did not like. The most common responses were about the "backstabbing" nature of politics, the slow going of the bureaucratic process, and corruption. A freshman woman said that, "So much mudslinging and negative campaigning occurs in politics today that by the time the actual election comes around, it is hard to know who the 'honest, upright, and superior' candidate is." Another woman said,

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<sup>11</sup> The male participants had very similar answers, except for one male participant who was the only person to declare that his interest in politics was for "power, status, and governing the people."

“Mostly, I dislike the personal bashing of each other during elections. It is supposed to be about the issues, not personal life” and that “I absolutely loathe the "fake" personalities that are driven more by getting their NAME out there instead of their IDEAS.”

The bureaucratic process bothered these women because “It can be frustrating to watch good legislative ideas founder in local and national politics.” Several thought that bureaucracy needlessly diminished resources that could be used elsewhere. Also, “There is so much gridlock in politics that prohibits many policies from coming to fruition. I also dislike the contentions debates that arise over controversial issues. Many politicians are too slick which gives politics a bad name.”

Similar opinions persisted about politics and corruption. Several of the participants equated politicians with corruption. Said one woman, “The worst aspect of politics is the constant corruption throughout the system. Many politicians are in this area for personal gain and not for the benefit of the people. This fact is inevitable, but I would say its one of the things I dislike about politics.” It did not appear that any of the participants found the negative aspects of politics to be large enough to deter them from participating.

We also asked why they were taking the training and what they hoped to get out of it. Most wanted to gain a general sense of how the AU student government works and how elections at AU worked. And many wanted to pair their involvement in student government now with a future in politics later. One freshman explained that, “I would like to be involved with AU Student Government, but I don't know how/where to start. I'm hoping Campaign College will help with that. Furthermore, I may go into politics as a career and this program will give me more perspective on that goal.” They wanted to learn specifics about “how to reach out to students to get their votes” and about what other women had done to help them succeed. Many

wanted to be able to network with other people with similar interests. Many also intended to use the program as a decision-making factor for them. They were scoping out whether or not they wanted to run. Several of the women expressed a desire to be on “the same level as my peers” and to “learn the rules and strategies” of running for office.

Finally, we explored whether or the participants felt that politics, especially at the undergraduate level, is fair to women. We specifically asked whether they thought that women had to play by different rules than men to be successful politically. Five of the women said that they believed that women and men did not face different rules. Ten of the women explained that they thought that there were differences between how men and women were expected to “play” politics. Most of the women identified stereotyping and negative perceptions of women as a barrier to politics that women have that men do not. As one freshman woman put it “Women are judged differently than men in their appearance and policy making ability. Women are just as cut throat but there are stereotypes that follow them.” And another woman warned about how image may be difficult to manage: “We need to be more careful about our public image portrayed. We need to look professional and sophisticated, yet not overly “sexual.” Being a woman works for us and against us, but only when used properly.”

Several of the women also noted that there are higher standards for women. As one freshman woman explained, “in our world today, women have to work twice as hard to be considered half as good.” They believed that the barriers women in national politics faced applied to undergraduate women, too. Said one woman, “I believe that in most situations in life, undergraduate women candidates have to work harder to be more successful in student government. I believe undergraduate women have a strong ability to lead. They just need the right tools and a stronger work ethic.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> None of the seven men participants thought that the rules were different for men and women.

## DISCUSSION:

Combined, these two studies give us important insight into young women's experiences with undergraduate politics. And at first glance, young women's experiences with USGs do not seem to be that negative. For example, while we discovered disparities between the number of men and women participating in USGs, there is actually more gender parity here than in state and national politics (41% women in USG legislatures versus 16% in Congress). This difference may be because these college women are the first generation to grow up with a multitude of female politicians as role models. Seeing women as governors and senators, Nancy Pelosi as the Speaker of the House and Hillary Clinton as a viable candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination may inspire young women to get involved in politics themselves. It may also be that college women face fewer roadblocks to candidacy, such as incumbency or fundraising, that women at the state and national level may face. Additionally, we may simply be seeing the effects of more female role models in politics or gender equity in undergraduate institutions in general. More women are entering college than men, there are increased opportunities for women to get involved in leadership positions on campuses, and there are more women in administrative leadership positions to provide role models for women's leadership.

Looking at higher rates of women in USGs than at the national level, we might think that gender parity in politics is right around the corner. This may not, however, be the case. While women make up 42% of USG executives, most of these women executives are vice presidents and secretaries, rather than presidents and treasurers. In fact, women make up only 21.05% of USG presidents in our sample. It is possible that women choose to run for vice president because, like adult women feel about their qualifications for candidacy, college women do not feel qualified to hold the higher, more powerful position of president. And it is possible that they



run for secretary because this is seen as a traditionally female role and thus is a less intimidating position. Men, on the other hand, may be seen as the natural candidates to be the leaders of the organization and to take care of the finances.

These gender differences in USG executives do not tell us whether women are running for these offices and losing or whether they simply do not run for them at all. It will take future research to really determine why this phenomenon occurs. But these differences do present a troubling snapshot of college women's status in college politics. It appears that gender role assumptions are alive and well.

But assuming that the number of women in USGs will continue to outstrip the number of women in national and state elective office, we must ask ourselves why gender parity in USGs does not translate into gender parity in politics at higher levels. When women graduate from college they are faced with the decisions of attending a graduate program, starting a career, starting a family or some combination of the three. Young women may feel like it is more important to get a start on any of these activities than it is to get involved in politics. And as most of the women political figures in office now waited until after their children were grown to take up a career in politics, it may not be immediately clear to young women that this is a viable option.

Young women may also feel like they are not qualified to fill an elected office. As stated above, women are already less likely than their similarly situated male counterparts to feel like they are qualified to run for office. Young women without career experience or advanced degrees may feel even less qualified to run even for local office. Women who held office in an USG may not feel like the skills they developed in a college elective office translate into real-world situations.

Finally, there are few training programs that cater specifically to young women's needs. Most candidate training programs are aimed at women with at least some experience in politics or who are already seen as viable candidates. There are few training programs that seek to take young women's interest in elective politics and groom them into candidates. If young women were to overcome these barriers, we could optimistically expect to see a filling of the political pipeline of women interested in politics and ready to run at the local, state and national levels, leading to an eventual increase in women in higher levels of government.

We were surprised to find both the differences between public and private schools and liberal arts colleges and universities. We expected public schools, with their large student bodies and vast campuses, to make it more difficult for women to participate in undergraduate politics. In such a case, they would have to rely more on media, meetings in the student union and other methods of campaigning that are more superficial than networking a social network that might exist at smaller, private schools. However this was not the case.

We also expected liberal arts colleges, with their foundation in civil rights, to foster more participation from women. For example, Oberlin College "was the first institution of higher education in America to adopt a policy to admit students of color (1835) and the first college to award bachelor's degrees to women (1841) in a coeducational program."<sup>13</sup> With such a history, it was surprising to find that, in fact, universities had more women members of USGs.

Future research must address why the differences in types of schools exist and what can be done to specifically alter these disparities. While we have discovered that there are differences, we do not know why they exist. It may be that the administrations at different schools are taking actions to ensure gender equity, that campus club are recruiting women to their USGs, that politically-minded women are attracted to certain types of schools, or that there

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.oberlin.edu/admissions/college/facts/>

are classes and curriculum that promoted female participation in politics. These are things that we cannot know without further delving into these issues.

Additionally, there are several possible issues with this data that should be addressed in future studies. First, we only looked at the nation's top schools. Thus our data may not be indicative of all schools as we have no way to know if our small sample of the country's top schools is representative of colleges in general, let alone community colleges, historically black colleges and universities, or military academies. Further studies need to be done to tease out the differences in these different populations as well as to provide a large enough sample size to see if school size and region actually place a role in young women's political participation. Such studies should be run quantitatively with statistical analysis.

Additionally, it is extremely difficult to determine the gender of all of the USG officers. Because of this, at some schools there are more unknown officers than there are men and women and it is difficult to determine what the true gender makeup would be. Also, there is not one single type of USG and so it is difficult to determine whether the structure of the USG itself may influence women's levels of participation. However, as the first objective look at USGs, opposed to past studies that tend to be survey-based and subjective, this study reveals some interesting, never-before-seen results.

The second part of our study, the survey of the young women candidates themselves, provides insight into what young women think about politics and how we might better support them in their endeavors to get involved in elective politics. First, it is clear that women recognize differences between how women and men in politics are treated and that they will experience difficulties if they enter into politics. However, despite this knowledge, they are not discouraged enough by it to avoid getting involved in politics. This is valuable because when

women know what they are getting into when they get involved in politics, they can be ready for many of the negative, discriminatory things that may happen to them as candidates or as office-holders. It also means that in encouraging women to get involved, there is less of a hurdle to overcome in convincing them that discrimination is not bad enough that it should keep them from running.

Second, our research shows that young women not only see politics as a dirty, possibly corrupt, game, but also that their involvement is necessary if they want to make a change in the system and on the issues that are important to them. They are likely to get involved in politics because they want to be the one to enact that change or advocate for their issue. This fact can be valuable in recruiting women to run for office. The benefits of running can be framed in terms of running to make a change around an issue that is important to them. The research about how women impact the policy discussion around issues of particular concern to women can be particularly useful in this regard.

Third, we discovered that the women in the program first were inspired to care about politics by role models in their personal lives and by growing up with politics in their homes. This indicates that the earlier women are introduced to politics, the more likely they are to get involved. It is particularly important to note that the women were most often introduced to politics through potent political role models such as family members or national office holders. It follows that an effective training program for young women would involve mentors and speakers that can offer their real world experience as proof that politics is something in which women can successfully engage.

Finally, most of the women in the program were interested in the Campaign College because they wanted specific information on how to run for office; they treated the training as a

way to build their tool box of skills. It is possible that the desire for this comes from the feeling of being “under-qualified” for the job. Campaign training programs must focus on practical, hands-on experience to make young women feel prepared to run for office and to assure them that they have the skills they need to be effective in office.

Obvious limitations to this part of the study include the extremely small sample size and the limited scope of the survey. As the lone program that conducts this type of training, the American University Campaign College provided few participants from which to gather data. Additionally, the women that chose to participate in the program already had interest in politics by virtue of being interested in attending such a program. Future work must be done to survey young women at large on their interest in college level and higher level politics. It may also be valuable to survey those women that are campus leaders outside of their USG in order to see why they do not run for office. Finally, future research must conduct more focus groups to determine how campus climate plays a role: do schools that place a strong emphasis on sports, or Greek life, or politics, or art foster or inhibit women’s participation?

By knowing what young women actually think about politics and what they think the obstacles to political involvement might be, we can better develop programs to address their concerns. The concerns over being prepared and developing strategy are those that we can directly conquer through training and outreach to women who might run for USGs. The concerns over things we cannot change, such as corruption or dealing with image issues, are still issues that we can warn young women about and better prepare them to face head on. By preparing women for these eventualities, we can help them win elections and make them more likely to stay involved long enough to get involved in local, state, and national politics.

*Conclusion:*

Of the sixteen women that attended the campaign college, six ran for office and two participated in the elections as campaign staff members. Of those that participated in the elections, all felt that the training had greatly contributed to their success. Obviously, young women are more than willing to run for office and more than capable of winning their elections if given the encouragement and skill training they need.

But campaign training for undergraduate women is almost non-existent. With persistent gender disparities in USGs, there is a great need for programs that address young women's insecurities with the election process such as reaching out to the campus community, dealing with gender discrimination, and using the distinct attributes of their type of school to their advantage.

There is even less focus on how to transition student leaders from their interest in politics in their USG to interest in politics at a local, state, and national level. It is possible that trainings conducted in colleges need to focus more on how to use experiences accumulated in USGs to build confidence and the likelihood that these women will run for office once they graduate.

## Appendix A



# WOMEN & POLITICS INSTITUTE

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## SCHOOL *of* PUBLIC AFFAIRS

### *Campaign College Survey*

Thank you for your participation in Campaign College: AU Women to Win. This qualitative research project is being conducted by the Women & Politics Institute in conjunction with a senior capstone project and will give us the opportunity to learn a bit more about college students' decision to go into politics. We are asking all program participants and speakers to respond to this brief survey. We ask that you put your name on the survey so that we can keep track of your campaigns at AU. As a result, we can ensure your confidentiality but not anonymity. In the written reports and papers from this data, personal quotes will not be attributed to participants by name, however, may be attributed to characteristics such as year in school.

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

### **Motivation:**

1. Who, or what, got you interested in politics? Was it a person, a specific event, something in your background or experience, or something else?

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2. What do you like about politics?

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3. What do you dislike about politics?

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4. Why are you enrolled in this training?

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5. What do you hope to get out of your participation in this program?

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**Ambition:**

6. What position are you interested in during the Fall 2007-Spring 2008 academic year?

Senator      Campaign Manager/Staff      Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. Would you consider running for an executive position (e.g. president, vice president, secretary, or comptroller)?

Yes      No

8. Are you interested in ever running for office at the state, local, or national level? (circle all that apply)



Local

State

National

I will not run for office

9. Why or why not?

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**Background:**

10. What year in school are you? (circle one)

Fresh.

Soph.

Junior

Senior

11. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

12. Have you been in a Student Government before?

Yes, In College

Yes, in High School

No

13. What was your position? (e.g. elected member, appointed member, president, vice president, etc). \_\_\_\_\_

14. What other campus organizations do you participate in at AU? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

15. Have you participated in a campaign training before?

Yes

No

If so, which one? \_\_\_\_\_

16. How did you hear about this program? (Check all that apply)

\_\_\_ Women's Initiative

\_\_\_ Women and Politics Institute

\_\_\_ Student Government

\_\_\_ Poster on Campus

\_\_\_ Facebook

\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Other Questions:**

17. Do you think there are different rules of the game for undergraduate women candidates for student government than undergraduate men candidates?

Yes No

If so, what are the rules?

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18. Would you be willing to be contacted for a follow up interview?

Yes    No

If so, what is the best way to contact you? \_\_\_\_\_

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Table 1:

	Public/Private		
	Private	Public	Overall
Average of Percent			
Women Executives	40.43%	45.80%	42.26%
Average of Percent			
Women Legislators	38.11	46.82%	41.24%

Table 2:

	Liberal Arts College/University		
	Liberal Arts College	University	Grand Total
Average of Percent			
Women Executives		39.38%	43.76%
Average of Percent			42.26%
Women Legislators		38.22%	42.93%
			41.24%

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