

# The Broken Gender Barrier in Scientific Academics

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One often suspects that many women in higher education head towards the humanities route. However, at Lake Forest College it is not uncommon to see women head in the doors of Lillard or Johnson towards their research labs, classrooms, or even to meet with groups they are peer mentoring. While the science field was once something to be perceived as male dominated, women have been infiltrating the labs and breaking down the gender barrier in science.

To be quite frank, this article started as an examination of young women persevering through the challenges of the Freshmen year science course load. At the time, the article didn't seem to be biased against women. After further examination, however, it became clear that believing that women seem to struggle more than men in the beginnings of their academic careers in science was inherently biased. After interviewing multiple freshmen women involved in the sciences at the college, I was surprised to find that there was no wavering in their pursuit of science despite their rigorous course load. After finding this, I conducted interviews with upperclassmen and found the same conclusions. It is not a case of gender when it comes to the workload struggle, but a case of passion. Women too have the passion for science that pushes them through rigorous academics.

The gender barrier was something that was present when many current students began to take science courses in elementary school. It was not uncommon to see portrayals of scientists, doctors, or those working in any STEM field as men. However, in the beginnings of the now college age student's education, there has been a push for students to continue on through science if they had passion towards it, without considering their gender. While it cannot be said that the gender barrier in science is breaking across the board, there is a sense of it crumbling at LFC. Many women in the science field interviewed pointed out that in some fields of study like Neuroscience, it seems that there are more women students than men. One student, Kayeneth Kahn '20, mentioned that the faculty is imperative in this, "Ever since I came to Lake Forest College, I have been even more set on pursuing STEM because of the supportive and helpful faculty there is here." The supportive faculty at Lake Forest College works to continue students to push through the academics they may face and work harder no matter their gender. From those interviewed the general consensus was that regardless of gender, there is an overarching belief that students have the potential to accomplish their goals if they have passion and are willing to put in the work.

This passion that powers them stems from student's ability to find science as something they excel at, the role models they've found in the STEM field, and their desire to achieve something greater than themselves. Multiple students interviewed mention their desire to become doctors, a few mentioned their hope of being a groundbreaking researcher, and all of them said they wanted to be these things because they love what science can accomplish. A freshmen student, Sarah Truxton, stated that achieving her scientific goals would mean to her, "...directly impacting so many people and [one] can literally save lives. I have always had a passion for helping others, and to be able to combine my love for science and service would make the best career. That is what drives me to work hard in my classes." There is no doubt in any of these women that their goals can be met if they work hard, and it has to be thought that the women that came before them helped pave this confidence in science.

It is not to say that women in science do not have the capability, intelligence, or strength, that created the gender barrier, but that women were often discouraged from science in earlier generations. The women that pushed past this resistance began knocking down the barrier so that women today can see that barrier as a thing of the past. Truxton cites her high school Biology teacher who continued to push her through her difficulties in science to help her achieve, an example of a woman of an earlier generation helping to break down that wall. Kahn also gave an example of a woman that inspired her. She mentioned that shadowing a woman vascular surgeon helped her develop her goal of pursuing sci-

ence. Women in science have continually pushed past stigma and drive themselves to work harder, and this drive has proven successful as more women pursue sciences.

This drive at Lake Forest College is remarkably clear in everything women in science at LFC can accomplish. Future Health Professionals, an organization on campus, is full of women leaders. Peer mentors in neuroscience encourage underclassmen female students by demonstrating their hard work, and throughout the academic field of science students, women are increasingly successful. It is at this point, that my original belief that there would be a difference in success based on gender, that I fully see how off base I was in pursuing this article. It is better to argue now that students, not men or women use their drive and ambition to continue on in their pursuit of science.

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