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Informed Choices: Gender Gaps in Career Advice

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POLICY BRIEF

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Yana Gallen and Melanie Wasserman

BRIEF HIGHLIGHTS

- *We conduct an experiment to investigate how a student's gender affects the information the student receives about careers.*
- *We had college students send messages requesting basic career information to 10,000 working professionals, each of whom randomly received a message from a male or female student.*
- *Female students were more likely than male students to receive replies with information on work/life balance issues.*
- *The work/life balance information was often negative and made students more concerned about this issue.*
- *By the study's end, female students were more deterred from their preferred career path; the greater emphasis on work/life balance issues they received partially drives this result.*

For additional details, see the full working paper at https://research.upjohn.org/up_workingpapers/340/.

College students often seek career advice from their social and professional networks, and the information that students receive may shape their perceptions of careers and influence their decision making. As of yet, there is little evidence on whether male and female students have access to the same information about careers. In our paper, we investigate whether student gender changes the information that students receive regarding various career paths.

We conducted a large-scale field experiment, in which college students who were interested in learning about various careers sent messages to 10,000 working professionals on a popular online professional networking platform. The questions were preformulated requests for basic information about the professional's career path. To test whether student gender affects the information students receive about careers, we randomized whether a professional received a message from a male or a female student. We focus our analysis on two career attributes that prior research has shown to differentially affect the labor market choices of women: work/life balance and workplace culture.

Our main finding is that student gender affects the information that professionals provide. When students ask a broad question about the pros and cons of the professional's career path, professionals are more than twice as likely to bring up work/life balance issues to female students than they are to male students. One explanation for this greater emphasis on work/life balance issues to female students is that professionals believe female students care more about this career attribute than male students do. We find, however, that even when students pose a question asking specifically whether work/life balance is a concern, professionals are still 28 percent more likely to respond to female students. In contrast, professionals bring up workplace culture issues to male and female students at equal rates.

Finally, we provide suggestive evidence that gender gaps in access to career information may matter for career choices. Information provided relating to work/life balance tends to be negative and increases students' concern about the issue. At the end of the study, we find that female students are more deterred from their preferred career path than male students, and this gender gap is partly explained by professionals' greater emphasis on work/life balance issues to female students.

Studying Informal Interactions in the Real World

Our study recruited 100 college students at a large research university to send messages to 10,000 professionals. The college students were selected based on their interest in learning about four career paths: management consulting, data science, finance, and law. The pool of professionals consists of approximately 10,000 individuals on the platform with work experience in these four fields.

In an in-person or virtual meeting, each student participant was guided through the process of creating a profile on a popular online professional networking site. Almost 90 percent of students already had a profile on this platform, and students commonly use it

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Professionals are more than twice as likely to provide information on work/life balance issues to female students than to male students.

to reach out to professionals for career information and advice. We asked all students to restrict their profiles to the same minimal information: first name and last initial, student status, university affiliation, start year and anticipated year of graduation, college major, and the number of network connections they had on the platform. These restrictions ensure that professionals have access to the same information on all student participants. To study how student gender affects the information received, we randomized whether each of the 10,000 professionals received a message from a male or a female student. We compare how professionals respond to male and female students who are otherwise similar (based on the above information). To this end, we limit the sample to students whose first names unambiguously convey their true gender.

The messages sent by students are preformulated questions seeking information about the professional's career path. The use of the professional networking platform as well as the text of the messages are based on a university career center's guidance for informational interviews. We used three question templates, each intended to test a specific hypothesis regarding gender differences in information acquisition:

- 1) **Broad question:** To test whether professionals emphasize different career attributes to male and female students, the broad message asked about the pros and cons of the professional's field.
- 2) **Specific question:** To test whether male and female students receive different advice conditional on raising a particular concern, some messages asked specifically about work/life balance or competitive culture. Previous studies have documented gender differences in preferences for competitive environments and temporal flexibility (Goldin 2014; Niederle and Vesterlund 2011; Wiswall and Zafar 2018).
- 3) **Factual question:** To test whether male and female students receive different information about factual content, we asked law professionals about the billable hours requirement for lawyers at large law firms.

We asked students to share with us the initial responses they received. For responses to the broad question, we coded whether the response mentioned work/life balance based on dictionary definitions and explicit references to work/life balance, hours worked per week, extent of work-related travel, and conflict or accommodation between work responsibilities and other life priorities. Here is one paraphrased example of a work/life balance mention: *Management Consulting can be considered a lifestyle since it requires travel, very long hours, always being on, and client-specific knowledge.*

We similarly coded mentions of competitive culture when the response explicitly mentioned competition within the workplace or among coworkers. However, because this was rare, we also created a broader metric of workplace culture, which included descriptions of interpersonal relations among colleagues, the work environment, or ethical issues in the workplace. This is an example of a culture mention: *Though this is changing, finance sometimes still depends on connections, bribes, or corruption.*

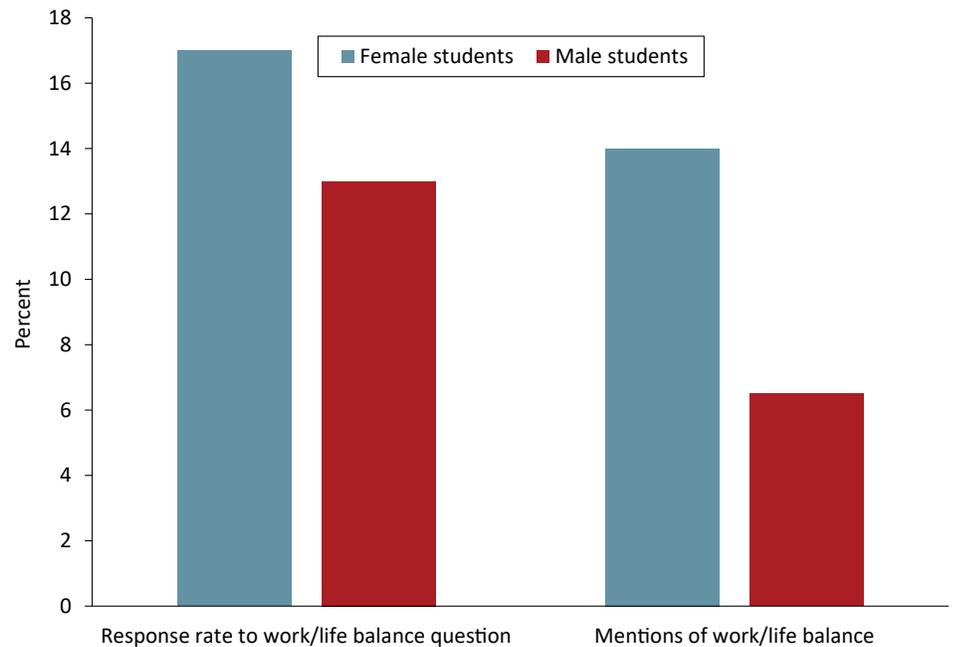
Results

Our main finding is that the information professionals provide depends on student gender. While the rate at which professionals responded to the broad questions was similar for male and female students, the text of the responses reveals substantial gender disparities. Professionals are more than twice as likely to provide information on work/life balance issues to female students relative to male students (see Figure 1). The vast majority of these mentions are negative and increase students' concern about this issue.

Are professionals simply tailoring their responses to what they think students care about? Using the specific questions, we focused professionals' perceptions on a discrete

Even when students ask specifically about work/life balance, professionals are more willing to engage with female students on this topic.

Figure 1 Response Rate or Rate of Mentioning Work/Life Balance



topic. When male and female students both directly asked for information on work/life balance, female students received 28 percent more responses than male students. This means that professionals' motivations for responding extend beyond their perceptions that female students are more interested in this topic.

Interestingly, we find no gender gap in professionals' emphasis on workplace culture, through either the broad or specific question.

Professionals may respond differently to male and female students on the work/life balance question because the true answer is gender specific. For example, women may struggle more on average with work/life balance, and professionals simply report this gender-specific answer to students of the corresponding gender. Using the factual question, we find some evidence that professionals continue to be more responsive to female students even when the answer to the question is objective and does not depend on student gender.

One might expect that the gender of the professionals themselves influenced the gender-specific responses on work/life balance, but we find that this played little role in explaining the gap. Both male and female professionals differentiated their responses by student gender.

Overall, these patterns suggest a subtle form of disparate treatment of individuals based on their gender. In particular, students' access to essential information about careers may depend on their gender in ways that may be difficult for students to ascertain.

Ramifications

We show that female students receive substantially more information on work/life balance than male students, whether they ask for it or not. A natural question is whether students are getting the information that they want. While research on midcareer individuals shows that women value work/life balance more than men, a recent *New York Times* article reports a gender reversal in preferences for work/life balance among 18- to 29-year-olds (Miller and Yar). Using a survey of students from the same university as our field experiment, we find that male students want to spend 40 percent more time

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These information gaps arise during a crucial point in students' lives—initial career choice—and may have long-lasting effects on career trajectories.

discussing work/life balance with a professional than do female students. Together, our study and the survey imply that the information professionals supply does not match the information students demand. In particular, relative to female students, male students receive less information on work/life balance, even when they specifically ask for it, and even though they want more of it.

Finally, we explore the ramifications of the information provided by professionals for students' career choices. We surveyed students regarding their career plans by asking whether they became more or less likely to enter their preferred career path between the start and end of the experiment. Female students reported greater deterrence from their original preferred career path than male students, and a key driver is the greater emphasis on work/life balance issues to female students. Thus, gender differences in access to information may lead men and women to select different careers.

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