

The working hypothesis of this paper is that the under-representation of women among professors of ancient history can be linked to an under-representation of women in undergraduate ancient history courses that creates a pipeline effect: because proportionally fewer women take courses in ancient history as undergraduates than take history or classics courses on topics other than ancient history, proportionally fewer of them go on to major in ancient history, apply to graduate schools, complete Ph.D.s, and ultimately enter the ranks of the professorate as teachers of the subject. How then do we stimulate more undergraduate women to go on to graduate work in ancient history? This talk will focus on three potential bottlenecks in the pipeline from frosh to faculty.

First, anecdotal evidence suggests that many women arrive at college having already decided on their majors. So the first obstruction may lie not at the college level at all but rather in the high schools. The precipitous decline in the teaching of Latin and Greek has meant that young women arrive at college with little exposure to the history of the ancient world. And the rise of world history at the expense of western civilization has dislodged antiquity from its long accustomed place as the fountainhead of European history. The substitution of social studies for history, too, is likely to have further diminished familiarity with the histories of Greece and Rome. A second factor may exacerbate this problem, and that is pre-professionalism. This challenge is common to all the liberal arts, but it has been suggested that young college women often have more complicated scripts in their heads than their male counterparts: they are thinking about becoming wives and mothers at the same time they are considering careers. The need to balance their family and professional lives may lead them to opt for majors that promise a shorter time to complete a program of study, better prospects for employment, a higher earning potential, and a much more limited commitment of time and energy than an academic career. A third potential bottleneck may offer better hopes. Once again, anecdotal evidence suggests that those students who do wind up majoring in history, even those who had not intended to do so, attribute their decisions to a good experience in an introductory history course. If that motivation is typical, then a solution may be simply to offer challenging and intellectually stimulating courses in ancient history that entice students—against their better judgment—to want more. The question however is whether there is a fundamental difference in what women and men find challenging and intellectually stimulating. Should we take an essentialist view that specifically “women’s” subjects mainly appeal to women and so enhance those aspects of our courses that focus on them? Or can we assume that undergraduate women are no different intellectually than their male counterparts, so that better teaching generally will draw them into our courses and lead some of them on to further study and a few of those into grad school? I hope discussion among the audience and the other members of the panel will be able to offer answers to a question that I have so far been unable to resolve in my own mind.