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# Postsecondary education gender disparities among Inuit in Alaska: A symptom of male malaise?

Judith Kleinfeld and Justin J. Andrews\*

**Résumé:** Les disparités entre les sexes dans l'enseignement postsecondaire chez les Inuit de l'Alaska: le symptôme d'un malaise masculin?

En Alaska, les femmes inuit sont de loin plus nombreuses dans l'enseignement postsecondaire que les hommes. Chez les Inupiat de l'Alaska, seulement 28% des étudiants inscrits dans les programmes du baccalauréat à l'Université de l'Alaska sont des hommes, et la proportion d'hommes ayant obtenu un diplôme de baccalauréat a décliné entre 2000 et 2003. Parmi les Yupiit, 30% des étudiants inscrits au baccalauréat sont des hommes. De semblables disparités entre les sexes se constatent chez les lycéens suivant des programmes destinés à préparer académiquement les étudiants autochtones au collège. Ce phénomène peut s'interpréter soit comme un signe de «malaise masculin», de désengagement vis-à-vis de l'instruction scolaire et des emplois salariés auxquels la scolarité est une préparation, soit comme une adaptation fonctionnelle à un mode de vie alliant emploi salarié et subsistance traditionnelle où l'instruction, et en particulier la formation supérieure, paraît moins importante aux hommes qu'aux femmes inuit. Afin d'argumenter l'explication de ce «malaise masculin», nous comparons deux régions inuit de l'Alaska, la région des Inupiat au nord-ouest, où la Corporation autochtone régionale a mis l'accent sur la création d'emplois au niveau local par le biais de la Red Dog Mine, et la région des Yupiit au sud-ouest, qui offre peu d'emplois, en particulier en dehors du réseau régional de Bethel. Dans le nord-ouest de l'Alaska, 49% des jeunes hommes inuit ayant entre 22 et 29 ans se décrivent eux-mêmes, dans le recensement de l'an 2000, comme étant «sans emploi» ou bien «en dehors de la force de travail». Dans le sud-ouest de l'Alaska, 48% des jeunes hommes inuit disent la même chose. Ces schémas soutiennent l'explication de ce «malaise masculin». Cependant, les études communautaires, qui permettent des analyses domestiques fines de la participation des hommes et des femmes dans l'emploi salarié et l'économie de subsistance, s'avèrent nécessaires pour distinguer entre ces deux explications ou suggérer d'autres interprétations.

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**Abstract:** Postsecondary education gender disparities among Inuit in Alaska: A symptom of male malaise?

Far more Inuit women in Alaska are pursuing postsecondary education compared to Inuit men. Among Inupiat in Alaska, only 28% of students pursuing baccalaureate degrees at the University of Alaska are male, and the proportion of males receiving baccalaureate degrees declined from 2000 to 2003. Among Yupiit, 30% of students pursuing baccalaureate degrees are male. Similar gender disparities occur in programs for high school students designed to prepare academically able Indigenous students for college. This phenomenon can be interpreted either as a sign of “male malaise,” of disengagement from education and the wage employment for which education is a preparation, or as a functional adaptation to a mixed wage and subsistence way of life where education and particularly higher education is less important to Inuit males than females. To examine support for the explanation of “male malaise,” we compare two Inuit regions of Alaska, the Inupiaq region of Northwest Alaska, where the regional Native corporation has emphasized providing employment within the region through the Red Dog Mine, and the Yup’ik region of southwestern Alaska, which has low numbers of jobs, particularly outside the regional hub of Bethel. In Northwest Alaska, 49% of young Inuit men, ages 22 to 29, described themselves in the 2000 census as either “unemployed” or “out of the labor force.” In Southwest Alaska, 48% of young Inuit men said the same thing. These patterns support the explanation of “male malaise.” However, community studies, which allow fine-grained, household analyses of male and female participation in the wage and subsistence economies are needed to distinguish between these two explanations or suggest other interpretations.

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## **Introduction**

Increasingly, attention is being drawn across the countries and regions of the Arctic, particularly by Indigenous peoples themselves, to the issue that many Indigenous young men are being “left behind” – in terms of geographic location, employment, educational achievement, and psychological well-being. Indigenous men throughout the circumpolar North are far more vulnerable to depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide than their female counterparts, and the Arctic Human Development Report in its discussion of gender issues emphasizes the need to identify and address issues facing Indigenous men, as well as women (AHDR 2004: 201). The purpose of this paper is to document the growing “gender gap” in enrollment in postsecondary education occurring among Inuit and other Indigenous groups in Alaska. Inuit women, far more than Inuit men, are acquiring the communication and quantitative skills important to employment in Native organizations, state and federal agencies, and the university system.

We offer two potential explanations of this gender disparity. According to the first explanation, the phenomenon is best understood as “male malaise.” Many young Inuit women are leaving remote rural communities for education and employment in regional and urban centers, leaving behind “bachelor cultures” of young men who can not find partners and who engage in alcohol abuse and other destructive behaviour (Hoogensen *et al.* 2004: 193). A second explanation is that the gender disparity among Inuit in postsecondary education represents a functional adaptation to a mixed wage and subsistence economy. Inuit women are more apt to pursue wage work in such industries as education and social and administrative services, for which formal education is important, while Inuit men are more apt to pursue blue collar work and subsistence activities, for which formal education is unimportant.

## **Review of the literature**

Gender disparities in enrollment in postsecondary education are occurring in many nations in the world, particularly those with post-industrial economies, such as the United States, Canada, and Western Europe (Hepburn and Simon 2006: 250). According to the UNDP (2004: 225), 134 women in Canada were enrolled in tertiary education programs for every 100 men; 127 women in the United Kingdom for every 100 men, and 123 women in France for every 100 men. In the United States, this phenomenon, dubbed the “gender gap,” has been extensively documented and is the subject of numerous newspaper and magazine articles. The postsecondary gender gap cuts across race and class, but is extreme among most minority groups. In 2000, white women earned 131 bachelor’s degrees for every 100 degrees conferred to white men (Sum *et al.* 2003: 25). That gap widens to 192 degrees for African-American women for every 100 degrees awarded to African-American men and 148 degrees awarded to Hispanic women for every 100 bachelor’s degrees awarded to Hispanic men. To clarify, the gender gap is the result of a dramatic increase in the proportion of the female population choosing to pursue higher education, while the proportion of the male population choosing to attend college has increased only slightly.

While Goldsmith *et al.* (2004: Ch.6-2) have pointed out that more Alaska Native females are attending college than Alaska Native males, we lack systematic documentation of this issue for Inuit in Alaska. “Alaska Natives” is a political designation, coined during the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement, to enable policymakers to refer to all Indigenous peoples party to the land claims settlement (Jennings 2004: 1-2).

## **Background**

The University of Alaska system is quite different from the Canadian system in its emphasis on providing educational opportunities for Indigenous students. While Jennings (2004) has criticized the institution for failing to respond to the educational needs of Indigenous students and for incorporating a Western, rather than an Indigenous, cultural worldview of education, by 2000, the University of Alaska system

had in place an extensive system for delivering higher education in remote rural regions and for supporting Native students who enrolled at the major urban campuses. In 2006, the flagship campus, the University of Alaska Fairbanks, had an Alaska Native executive dean directing the College of Rural and Community Development, the centre of educational outreach. The university offered as well both on- and off-campus programs, such as Rural Development, designed to prepare Indigenous students for managing organizations and programs in rural Alaska. The directors of the regional campuses serving Indigenous regions, such as the Kuskokwim Campus and the Interior-Aleutian campuses, are also Alaska Natives.

Enrolling nearly 35,000 students, including nearly 17,000 degree-seeking students, the University of Alaska system is the only public institution of higher education in Alaska. In addition to the three main campuses in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau, the university system also includes satellite campuses in regional hubs with large Indigenous populations, including the major Inuit population centers, Barrow, Bethel, and Kotzebue. The University of Alaska also offers a robust distance-learning program which makes higher education available in every rural village.

The University of Alaska also provides support to Indigenous students once they enroll. The University of Alaska Fairbanks, for example, has a strong Rural Student Services program, several Alaska Native clubs and organizations, and residence facilities sponsored by Native organizations designed to ease the transition from village to university life. The Rural Student Services program offers transitional academic courses, counseling, and social activities to Indigenous students, most of whom come from remote villages in Alaska. The program is housed in an attractive campus setting, a building which offers a gathering room for social events, up to date computers, new furniture, and other amenities intended to signal the institution's commitment to serving Alaska Native students.

In an effort to attract Alaska Native students to college, the University of Alaska Fairbanks has also developed the Rural Alaska Honors Institute (RAHI), a full-scholarship, six-week intensive college-preparatory program. Using a far-flung recruitment strategy incorporating schools, counselors, and word-of-mouth, RAHI brings students from remote regions of Alaska to the Fairbanks campus over the summer and has developed many strategies designed to help them make the academic and social transition from high school to college, such as offering students the opportunity to take up to three courses which earn full college credit.

In another effort to attract students from every part of the state, the University of Alaska also offers \$11,000 scholarships to the top 10% of the graduating class of every high school in Alaska, greatly increasing the accessibility of a college education to Alaska Native students, many of whom attend small high schools in rural villages. Regional Native organizations, which administer social service programs, also routinely provide college scholarships to Indigenous students from their areas.

In short, the opportunity to go to college is widely available for both male and female Indigenous students throughout Alaska, through college programs located in

regional hubs near Alaska Native villages, distance education programs offered in remote villages, the availability and accessibility of special preparatory and scholarship programs, and the emphasis on the support and retention of Alaska Native students in the main campuses of the University of Alaska system. In Alaska, this policy emphasis on making higher education accessible for Indigenous people is the educational context for the growing gender gap in higher education among Inuit and other Indigenous groups.

## **Methods**

The data presented in this report were provided by the University of Alaska Statewide Office of Budget and Institutional Research, using special computer runs of internal enrollment data, with full cooperation and funding from the University's Office of Student Enrollment Services. Data on RAHI participants and University of Alaska Scholars were provided through special data analyses conducted by the respective programs. These data are not always available for Inuit alone and, where we have not been able to obtain data for Inuit, we report information for the more commonly used policy category, "Alaska Natives." Once analyzed, the data and its implications were discussed with Native educators at the University of Alaska, Native educators representing Native organizations, and later with the University's Board of Regents. Native educators have been well aware of the gender gap in college education, and are working to understand and address this issue.

## **Findings**

In 2003, the University of Alaska system enrolled 16,851 degree-seeking students, with Alaska Natives representing a mere 9% of the degree-seeking student body. Among the total university population (including non-degree-seeking students, Alaska Natives totaled 13.9% of the student body).

Our findings indicate that among Inupiat students seeking baccalaureate degrees in 2003, just 28% were male, a decrease from 2000, when the proportion was 33% (Table 1). Masters degrees show a similar pattern, declining from 56% male in 2000 to 33% male in 2003. This said, the absolute numbers of Inupiat males seeking baccalaureate degrees has increased slightly, from 47 students in 2000 to 60 students in 2003. In short, while more Inupiat males are enrolling in postsecondary education, the increase is far more dramatic among Inupiat females. Among Yupiit, 30% of students seeking baccalaureate degrees and 39% of students seeking master's degrees are males. The absolute numbers of Yupiit males seeking baccalaureate and masters degrees have increased from 50 to 88 since 2000, but these increases remain far below the increase in absolute numbers of Yupiit females. Similarly, the absolute numbers of Aleut males seeking baccalaureate degrees increased, from 28 in 2000 to 44 in 2003, while 3 Aleut males sought masters degrees in 2003, compared to none in 2000. But the increase in enrollment at the baccalaureate level and masters level for Aleut females was greater.

Table 1. Enrollment in degree programs at the University of Alaska for Inuit and other Indigenous groups showing male disparities.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>
Inupiat	Associate	Female	48	57	66	58
		Male	24	23	33	27
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>32%</b>
	Baccalaureate	Female	95	114	124	157
		Male	47	51	44	60
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>28%</b>
	Masters	Female	4	9	11	10
		Male	5	3	5	5
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>33%</b>
Yupit	Associate	Female	78	77	115	152
		Male	35	41	48	39
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>20%</b>
	Baccalaureate	Female	132	126	141	181
		Male	46	55	72	79
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>30%</b>
	Masters	Female	4	9	9	14
		Male	4	4	6	9
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>39%</b>
Aleut	Associate	Female	51	52	53	59
		Male	22	28	28	30
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>34%</b>
	Baccalaureate	Female	63	68	85	94
		Male	28	31	46	44
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>32%</b>
	Masters	Female	6	4	5	10
		Male	0	0	0	3
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>23%</b>
Total Alaska Inuit (Inupiat, Yupit, Aleut)	Associate	Female	177	186	234	269
		Male	81	92	109	96
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>26%</b>
	Baccalaureate	Female	290	308	350	432
		Male	121	137	162	183
<b>%Male</b>		<b>29%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>30%</b>	

	Masters	Female	14	22	25	34
		Male	9	7	11	17
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>33%</b>
Athabascan	Associate	Female	81	95	116	122
		Male	36	32	42	41
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>25%</b>
	Baccalaureate	Female	109	103	112	138
		Male	30	38	36	47
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>25%</b>
	Masters	Female	7	15	9	15
		Male	0	1	1	3
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>17%</b>
Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian	Associate	Female	9	16	16	27
		Male	11	17	9	13
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>33%</b>
	Baccalaureate	Female	31	35	39	46
		Male	18	19	19	39
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>46%</b>
	Masters	Female	6	5	6	6
		Male	2	4	2	3
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>33%</b>
Total Alaska Natives (Inuit and other Indigenous Alaskan students)	Associate	Female	267	297	366	418
		Male	128	141	160	150
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>26%</b>
	Baccalaureate	Female	430	446	501	616
		Male	169	194	217	269
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>30%</b>
	Masters	Female	27	42	40	55
		Male	11	12	14	23
		<b>%Male</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>29%</b>

For other Indigenous groups, the lowest proportion of males seeking baccalaureate degrees occurs among Athabascan Indians with just 25% male students. Southeastern Indian groups, the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian, which had the most developed political organizations prior to the Alaska Native Land Claims movement, have the highest rate of males seeking baccalaureate degrees, 46%.



In sum, while we note a small increase in the absolute number of male Inuit degree-seeking students at the University of Alaska (296 men in 2003, an increase from 211 in 2000), this small increase in enrollment is eclipsed by the much greater increase of female Inuit students (735 women in 2003, an increase from 481 in 2000). Similar results are found for all Alaska Natives.

The gender gap in academic engagement and success is evident far before Alaska Native students reach higher education. The Rural Alaska Honors Institute, as previously mentioned, was established to recruit promising Alaska Native high school students, offer them a free summer college preparation program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and provide follow-up encouragement and college guidance. According to program records, 66% of the 1,036 students that have attended RAHI since its inception were female. Of those who have gone on to higher education and received degrees, 100% of those obtaining doctorates (6 RAHI alumni) have been female; 71% obtaining masters degrees have been female (15 females and 6 males); and 78% obtaining bachelor's degrees have been female (132 females and 38 males). Even among those who graduate from far shorter associate degree programs<sup>1</sup>, 71% have been female (54 females and 22 males). RAHI program administrators are well aware of the gender gap and have intensively recruited young Native males, but with only modest success.

A similar gender gap is evident in the Alaska Scholars Program, which offers a University of Alaska scholarship to the top 10% of each high school graduating class in Alaska. Among Alaska Scholars in 2004 as a whole, nearly two-thirds were female. Among Indigenous Alaska Scholars, over 70% were female.

## Discussion

The gender gap in postsecondary education for Inuit in Alaska means that far more females than males will be prepared for employment in professional and administrative positions in the Native corporations established under the Alaska Native Land Claims Act and associated Native nonprofit organizations which deliver health, education, and social services to Indigenous groups. Nor will many Inuit males have the education needed for university faculty positions or posts requiring higher education in state and federal agencies or the private sector.

Apart from the issue of the social costs in developing Inuit male leadership, the gender gap in postsecondary education among Inuit may be a symptom of a "male malaise" that may be occurring in many regions of the world for reasons which social scientists do not clearly understand. While many women are surging into education and pursuing careers, some men, particularly young men, appear to be disengaging from productive activity. Edelman *et al.* (2006: 11-19) documented this phenomenon in the United States in 1999, defining as "idle" youth aged 16 to 24 in the civilian noninstitutional population who are neither employed nor enrolled in school. Among

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<sup>1</sup> An "associate degree" typically takes two years to complete. Some of these degrees are vocational. Other associate degrees are used as transfer degrees into a four year baccalaureate program.

males, 17% of Black youth, 12% of Hispanic youth, and 4% of white youth had been “idle” for at least the entire previous year. “For young men who disconnect from school and work, the price they pay over the course of their lives, in terms of lost employment and earnings, will be very large,” they point out (*ibid.*: 26). Such disconnection also imposes social costs, such as high incarceration and low marriage rates, which in turn contribute to high levels of poverty for children in single-parent families.

For Inuit in Alaska, however, we offer a second explanation for low male enrollment in higher education, which interprets this phenomenon as a possible functional adaptation to a mixed wage and subsistence economy in rural regions. In the Inupiaq regions of Alaska, the North Slope and Northwest Alaska, plentiful employment opportunities are available which do not require higher education. The Northwest Alaska Native Corporation (NANA), for example, has set as its corporate mission the social goal of making employment opportunities available in the region. NANA entered into cooperative arrangements with the Red Dog zinc mine not only to generate profits for its shareholders, but also to provide its shareholders with employment opportunities at the mine as well. More Inuit men may be choosing to pursue high paid employment in such blue collar jobs while Inuit women may be choosing employment in health, education, and social services for which postsecondary education is an asset. In our fieldwork in rural communities, we have come across family patterns where the husband watches the children during the school year, while the mother works at the school, with roles reversed in the summer, where the father pursues wage work and the mother cares for the children.

How can these two explanations be distinguished? What is needed is fine-grained community level research which explores male and female participation in the wage and subsistence economies and the relationship of gender roles to educational attainment. In the absence of such contemporary ethnographic research, we can obtain some information by using 2000 census data for Inuit regions to examine Inuit male and female labour force participation and unemployment among young adults in regions with high and low job opportunities (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development 2000: 38, 48). If Inuit regions with high levels of local employment opportunities, such as Northwest Alaska, still show high rates of joblessness among young males, this would be evidence for the “male malaise” explanation, especially if rates of male joblessness were not substantially different from regions with low levels of local employment opportunities, such as the Yup’ik region, represented chiefly by the Calista Native Corporation, in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region of southwestern Alaska.

Goldsmith *et al.* (2004: Table 79) provide such statistics for NANA and for Calista shareholders, as well as for other Native corporations. Among NANA shareholders, with a population of 317 males aged 22 to 29, 49% were either unemployed (23%) or not in the labour force (26%). Among Calista shareholders, with a population of 898 males aged 22 to 29, 48% were either unemployed (20%) or not in the labour force (28%). In short, nearly half of young men in their early adult years were not working in the wage economy, with virtually no difference in regions with high and low employment opportunities.

Among young women in both regions, we see less unemployment and more labour force participation, even though these women are in primary childbearing years and are apt to have small children to care for. Among the 294 females who are NANA shareholders, aged 22 to 29, 37% were either unemployed (15%) or not in the labour force (22%). Among the 984 females who are Calista shareholders, aged 22 to 29, 43% were either unemployed (18%) or not in the labour force (25%). In NANA, with more jobs available, unemployment was lower among young women than in Calista, with fewer jobs available. The reverse is the case for young men.

According to some observers in these communities, Inuit men are undergoing an extended period of adolescence which lasts well into their twenties and thirties. Inuit men in their forties and fifties, in contrast, are more apt to be productive in both the wage and subsistence economies. If this is the case, is it a generational or a maturational difference? Again, ethnographic research is needed at the community level to provide an understanding of these patterns.

## **Conclusion**

The gender gap in educational attainment will be a challenging policy problem to address across the circumpolar North. Dramatic changes in the communities and in society as a whole have their own ever-increasing momentum as more women leave rural communities for regional and urban centers, creating opportunities for other female friends and relatives to join them and develop informal networks of Indigenous women who provide each other with employment options and emotional and social support. But to ignore the problem of the gender gap will virtually guarantee that present trends will continue and accelerate, with great damage to the cultural vitality of Indigenous communities in the circumpolar North. The problem may be more tractable than we suspect from an analysis of cultural and social forces. Every human being wants to be needed and useful to his or her family and society and Indigenous men may well desire and be willing to seize such opportunities if framed in a culturally appropriate way.

Interpreting the educational gap as a symptom of a more general problem of “male malaise,” however, calls for an understanding of the phenomenon and for policy responses more encompassing than changes in the educational system. We urge further research on such questions as gender differences in participation in employment, subsistence, and other activities deemed as “productive” from an Indigenous viewpoint and generational and maturational differences in such productivity. The context for exploring such questions should not be limited to Inuit communities. Such male disengagement, as we have previously indicated, is occurring in many nations and may need to be understood in a far broader context. Gender role expectations for women now include the ability to support themselves and their children, without dependency on a male provider. The implications of this change in gender roles for men who used to see their role as provider for their families remains to be understood.

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