Could It Happen to Me?: Female Business Students’ Expectations of Gender Inequality in the Workplace

Overview. Today, women make up 51 percent of the population and account for 40 percent of full-time managers; however, these managers earn only 81 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. Furthermore, women hold only 14 of the Fortune 500 CEO seats and only 14.7 percent of Fortune 500 board seats. The disparity between women and men in pay, advancement, and leadership opportunities is clear. Are aspiring female business professionals aware of the current state of leadership in terms of gender? The purpose of the present study is to ascertain undergraduate women’s perceptions of anticipated gender inequalities in the workplace.

Methodology. Data for this project has been gathered by Brittany Graber and Nicole Lence, both undergraduate women in the College of Business who have completed MGMT 494 Gender and Leadership, taught by Dr. Kristina Bourne. In the fall, they each interviewed 10 of their female upper-division business student peers for a total sample of 20 students. The structured interviews focused on their peers’ knowledge and expectations of gender issues as they embark on their careers. The student researchers have fully transcribed all of the interviews and are currently in the analysis stage of the project, performed under the advisement of Dr. Bourne.

Significance. This research project is significant because today’s undergraduate women are tomorrow’s leaders in business and in society. The most recent incoming class of freshmen at the UW-Eau Claire was 61% female and 39% male, which mirrors the breakdown new freshmen in the College of Business. Knowledge of young women’s perceptions and experiences will tell us whether or not our female students are prepared for the types of gender issues they are likely to experience in their professional lives. The more students are prepared for the realities of a gendered workplace, the more likely they will be able to make social change.

*This project was supported by a gift made to the College of Business from the Phillips Family Foundation.*