

Women's enrollment at many business schools still hovers around 30 percent, even while law and medical schools have long enjoyed gender parity.

Now, prominent advocates for women in business are focusing their efforts on this issue, intent on breaking the 30-percent barrier.

by **Tricia Bisoux**

In the 21st century, a young girl can grow up to be CEO of a Global 500 company, owner of her own multimillion dollar business, or chairwoman of the board. But that doesn't mean she'll *want* to. In general, women seek careers that offer challenge, meaning, flexibility, and connection; but unfortunately, many young women don't view business as a means to those ends.

"Business schools are not competing with each other as much as with other professional schools for the hearts and minds of women," says Myra Hart, a professor of management at Harvard Business School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Women see the upper echelons of business as more hierarchical, whereas they see law and medicine as something they can do individually or collaboratively. They perceive that they will have more control over their careers in these fields than in business, and that they'll still be able to make a difference."

It would be naïve to say that gender discrimination no longer exists, but it may no longer be the central barrier to women's entry into the business world. Research shows that

women often eschew business education due to preference, not prejudice. That reality presents an unexpected challenge to business schools: To move beyond 30 percent, b-schools may need to do more than actively recruit women. They may need to change their admissions requirements, curricula, and faculty hiring requirements to win women over.

No single corrective is likely to shift the tide, believes Anna K. Lloyd, CEO of the Committee of 200 (C200), a Chicago-based organization of women business leaders that supports women in enterprise. "If I were a business school dean, I would start focus groups and talk to women across all backgrounds, all family situations," she says. "I would rethink the structure of the courses, the ability of the professors, and the financial aid offerings. MBA programs, too, need to be recast—business schools and their curricula need to catch up with the level of self-confidence of this generation of women."

Professor Liz Fulop, head of the school of Marketing and Management at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia,

agrees. “Businesses and universities have to work together to change how women perceive business as a career option and emotional investment,” she says. “That will entail a great deal of soul-searching about why, despite all we have done, universities and businesses remain lonely places for women at the top and pressure cookers for those in the middle.”

Organizations such as C200 are making an effort to accelerate the soul-searching process, by developing coalitions to work with businesses and business schools and sponsoring research to delve more deeply into the issues. A groundswell of activity is building, especially in the United States, to convince women that business careers are compatible with life goals that often include work *and* family. To achieve this goal, many believe business schools will need to change on fundamental levels to promote a sense of balance between the two. Otherwise, if they appear to force women to choose between work and family, most often family will win out.

A Paradigm Shift

The root of women’s lack of participation in business is firmly planted in image—the aggressive, hierarchical image that business seems to convey to women. A lack of successful role models is a top factor in that negative message, says Phyllis Buford, CEO of the Consortium for Graduate Study in Management in St. Louis, Missouri.

“If young girls don’t see the proper role models—if we don’t show them more Carly Fiorinas—then they may not even give a business career a second thought,” says Buford. “The more we make young girls aware of careers in business, the more we’ll see women in those careers. We must break the myth that girls can’t add, subtract, and divide as well as men can. And we must create a marketing strategy that tells women about careers in business.”

56% of women MBA students cite the lack of role models as the primary reason more women don’t seek graduate business degrees.

87% believe featuring more women business leaders as role models would encourage more women to pursue a business education.

—“Women and the MBA: Gateway to Opportunity”

Lisa Kudchadker, an MBA student and president of the Graduate Women in Business, a student organization based at Rice University in Houston, Texas, points to the case studies that she says are too heavily centered on male experience. “Eighty to 90 percent of protagonists in our case studies are male,” she notes. “When there is a female protagonist, she’s usually in trouble. That’s discouraging, and it’s something that needs to change.”

Unfortunately, the role models that are available can reinforce the idea that business and family are mutually exclusive terms. New, controversial research in the book *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* exacerbates this perception.

Author Sylvia Ann Hewlett found that many successful women in business planned to have children; in their pursuit of success, they just “forgot,” she writes. As a result, some women “feel as if they’ve been robbed” of the chance to start a family. Some have criticized the book’s findings, but its message to women is clear: You can have children or a career in business, not both.

On top of that, *Time* recently published a list of women who resigned from high-powered positions to be with their families: Karen Hughes stepped down from her post as aide to George Bush to spend more time with her family in Texas; Jane Swift dropped out of the Massachusetts gubernatorial race soon after giving birth to twins; Candace Olsen, CEO of the Web site iVillage, resigned to take care of her two children. In the face of such press, b-schools may have their work cut out for them.

Katherine Giscombe, senior director of research with the women’s organization Catalyst, New York City, notes that more corporations are adding family-friendly incentives such as flex-time and onsite daycare to their “perks,” but they are not yet the norm. “Work-family programs need to be strengthened,” she says. “If a woman wants to work part-time for a few years, she should not worry about getting bumped off the track to successful positions. She should not be penalized.”

10.9% of dean positions and **21.3%** of associate dean positions in the U.S. are filled by women.

—AACSB International



Girl Scout badges, clockwise from top left: **Your Own Business, Business-Wise, Dollars & Sense, and Money Sense.**

It will take initiatives on many different fronts not only to cultivate more role models, but to make business a more prominent and palatable career option for women. The problem as it manifests at the MBA level is only the tip of the iceberg, believe women's groups. Many corporations, business schools, and organizations are encouraging positive role models in the media and business case studies; they're also sponsoring programs at high schools and working to change the corporate mindset that women must put their careers first, or risk being left behind. They maintain that only by focusing on the pipeline at all levels—middle school, high school, college, graduate school, and the corporate world—can business schools expect to see an increase in the number of women in their ranks.

Early Exposure

Business educators may not realize it, but teenage girls receive subliminal messages about business, messages promoted by television and other media that portray business as a hierarchical, cutthroat enterprise. Those messages need to change, says Fiona Wilson, assistant professor at the Simmons School of Management. The school is part of Simmons College, a women-only college in Boston, Massachusetts.

"We know that neither teenage boys nor teenage girls have a particularly favorable view of companies," she says. "In fact, Andersen did a survey in 2001 that found that 45 percent of teens have an unfavorable impression of corporate America. We know they're not thinking favorably about business. We just don't know why."

Simmons College is working with the C200 on a landmark study that will look at the messages that young girls receive about business, from their middle school to undergraduate years, explains Wilson. "We want to look at women at the formative stages of their education, when they begin

53% of women business owners participated in the Girl Scouts of the USA as young girls.

—1998 study from the National Foundation for Women Business Owners

to think about careers for the first time," she says. "Our research will focus on girls and boys in middle school and high school at about 20 different schools around the United States. This population has never really been looked at this way before." The study, which will be completed this fall, will look at the top-ranked television programs, magazines, and Web sites for teenagers to explore how businesspeople, especially women in business, are portrayed.

C200 and others sing the praises of efforts of organizations that show girls a positive image of business, such as the Girl Scouts of the USA, headquartered in New York City. Girl Scouts, at all ages, can earn badges in entrepreneurship, business, and money management. The message of these popular badges, says Sara Au, the organization's media consultant, "is to help girls learn the kinds of financial lessons that will help them succeed in the real world."

Another organization at the center of efforts to introduce girls to business is Independent Means, a for-profit company based in Santa Barbara, California, with sister programs in New Zealand and Australia. IM offers products to help girls become financially independent, and also sponsors summer programs for girls such as Camp CEO and Camp \$tartup.

MBA graduates, corporations, and schools such as Babson College in Babson Park, Massachusetts, and Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, have been active participants in IM programs, says Brooke Espinoza, the organization's program manager. To see an appreciable change in the numbers of women enrolling in their programs, she says, business schools may need to set their sights on adolescents to truly see a boost in the number of women on their campuses.

Young girls have a "very active entrepreneurial streak," says Espinoza. That streak, however, is often not channeled into corporate careers. "The corporate world can be seen as cutthroat, but entrepreneurship often speaks to women; they know it allows them to design their own schedules. When young girls look to their futures, they aren't thinking, 'I want a family and I want to work.' They're thinking, 'I want a family and I want to work—and I don't want to feel guilty about it.'"

In addition, many girls envision their future careers as "socially responsible" or meaningful, descriptions that

current representations of business do not often inspire, adds Espinoza. In an effort to change that perception, Independent Means itself changed from a nonprofit company to a for-profit entity, Espinoza explains. “We wanted to show girls that we actually practice what we preach.”

Populating the Pipeline

Unfortunately, girls’ enthusiasm for business—or at least business education—is often lost by the time they reach college graduation. Women’s enrollment in undergraduate business programs is at or near parity with men; but that number drops dramatically at the graduate level, according to “Women and the MBA: Gateway to Opportunity.” The study is a result of the collaborative efforts of Catalyst; the University of Michigan Business School, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and the Center for the Education of Women, also at the University of Michigan.

Giscombe of Catalyst puts it bluntly: “Younger women aren’t choosing careers in business because they still perceive

the business world as unaccommodating to women.”

Catalyst, which has long studied women in U.S. businesses, will soon be completing a study on women in corporate leadership in Europe, to see how the problem crosses borders, she says. In addition, Catalyst, along with C200, is also joining a new nonprofit organization at the University of

48% of undergraduate students in U.S. business schools are women.

—“Women and the MBA: Gateway to Opportunity”

35% of MBA students at 251 business schools worldwide are women.

—*BusinessWeek Online*

Getting Involved

Several organizations, including the following, publish studies and other information about gender parity issues. Many of these organizations are also interested in forming alliances with business schools worldwide to increase women’s participation in business:

Catalyst

120 Wall Street, 5th Floor
New York, New York 10005
212-514-7600
info@catalystwomen.org
www.catalystwomen.org

The Committee of 200

625 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 500
Chicago, Illinois 60611
312-751-3477
info@c200.org
www.c200.org

The Consortium for Graduate Study in Management

5585 Pershing, Suite 240
St. Louis, Missouri 63112
888-658-6814
buford@cgsbm.org
www.cgsbm.org

Girl Scouts of the USA

420 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10018
800-478-7248
misc@girlscouts.org
www.girlscouts.org

Graduate Women in Business

c/o Rice University
Jones Graduate School of Management
6100 Main Street
Houston, Texas 77005
lisak@rice.edu
www.gwib.org

Independent Means

126 Powers Avenue
Santa Barbara, California 93103
805-965-0475
webmaster@independentmeans.com
www.independentmeans.com

The University of Michigan Business School Women’s Initiative

Jeanne Wilt, executive director
701 Tappan, Room D2260
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109
734-763-1276
jwilt@umich.edu
www.bus.umich.edu/womenMBA/initiative.html

30% of MBA students in U.S. business schools are women.

—“Women and the MBA: Gateway to Opportunity”

24.8% of students in U.S. executive MBA programs are women.

—AACSB International

Michigan Business School, which comprises an alliance of business schools, corporations, and nonprofit groups. The nonprofit, which is yet to be named, has a monumental task before it, which requires the participation of the business school community to be a success, says Jeanne Wilt, the new organization’s executive director and the assistant dean for admissions and career development at UMBS.

“There is nothing else out there serving this particular niche, nothing else that ties business schools and business together to address this problem,” Wilt points out. The organization will respond to a number of issues raised in the “Women and the MBA” study, including pipeline development, the introduction of more role models, and education about the nature of a business career. Twelve U.S. schools are now participating in the organization, and two international schools also have expressed interest, says Wilt.

“It’s an issue of basic pipeline development and a lack of positive role models of women in business. More important, there is a lack of understanding among women about what business is,” she explains. “It’s very clear to them what a doctor or lawyer does, for example, but they have more stereotypical ideas about business. They think it’s all about Wall Street.” It’s up to the business community, she stresses, to give them more accurate, attractive images to consider.

Advancing to Parity

Many business schools that have made women’s enrollment a priority have reached levels of 38 and even 40 percent. According to the Committee of 200 Business Leadership Index 2002, however, women still lag behind men in every area of business. The wage gap has closed to a 7.60 on a ten-point scale, but in areas such as venture capital funding, they are at a woefully low 1.10. And index of charity fund-raising seats? Zero.

The situation has reached a breaking point, many believe. A shortage of workers in business is expected to hit peak levels by the end of this decade. To that end, many believe it is now urgent to encourage more women and minorities to enter the pipeline.

“We started to see research about diversity in the workplace in the late 1980s,” says Wilt of the University of Michigan Women in Business Initiative. “More than ten years later, we see improvement in other areas, but not in this one. As we look forward to a much more diverse society, we need the education pipeline to support that.”

Sonja Ossario, Catalyst’s director of public affairs, points out that in the future, more companies will see their diversity not as an obligation, but as a source of strength. “In a recent study, we found that 89 percent of the top companies

Where a **10** benchmark equals parity with men in 10 aspects of business such as salary, board seats, and venture capital funding, women have reached an average **3.95**.

—The Committee of 200 Business Leadership Index 2002

500,000 executive, managerial and administrative jobs will open up annually in the U.S. between now and 2008. However, **250,000** each year only business majors graduate.

—“The Pipeline Report, 2002,” The Diversity Pipeline Alliance

have a diversity program in place. They do this to gain a competitive advantage—to be able to draw from the full pool of talent, not just half.”

A new push for the promotion of business may increase gender equity and diversity in the workplace, but many foresee that its success may go beyond benefiting only women. As more men begin to assume household and childrearing responsibilities, it is expected that they, too, will begin to demand change in educational and work requirements. Change at all levels of the pipeline, from high school to college to the workplace, may also simply make the corporate world a more comfortable and productive place to work, for both men and women. **Z**