

Executive Summary

“We barely finished the lab on time and headed out... My partner was in the elevator, but he didn't see me. He was too busy talking with a friend of his, explaining how [upset] he was about barely finishing the lab and debugging the circuit for so long. I guess his friend saw that I was his partner (without seeing me in the elevator) because he said, ‘Well that's what you get for working with a girl. These kinds of labs aren't really their thing.’ My partner just laughed and said, ‘Yeah, fucking sucks.’”

- Class of 2017, Computer Science

MIT has made great strides towards gender equality since Ellen Henrietta Swallow was admitted as the institution's first female student in 1871. Today, the gender ratio of the undergraduate population is close to equal—46% of undergraduate students are female. Despite the even gender distribution, female and male students continue to have different experiences at MIT.

Society places different expectations on people based on their gender, which influences behaviors and preferences of students before they arrive on campus. In high school, males were significantly more likely to have “[Written] a working computer program,” “[Built] a working machine or electrical circuit,” and “[Started] a company, either alone or with others.”¹ As a result, females are at a disadvantage due to their comparative lack of experience in entrepreneurship and certain technical skills.

Despite the differences in high school experience, by the time female students graduate, they are just as successful as their male peers across many dimensions. Graduating females have statistically higher grade point averages (GPAs) than their male counterparts, controlling for major.² Furthermore, while an average of 94.0% of females in the 2001 to 2009 fall cohort years graduated within six years, only 90.6% of males graduated in the same amount of time.² The gender difference in academic achievement is particularly important given the negative stereotypes associated with females in technical fields.

Female students on average are also as successful as their male peers across many metrics outside of academics. For example, during their time at MIT, females and males are equally as likely to receive an award or to publish a paper.³ In 2014, females also held 46% of the presidential positions in clubs recognized by the Association of Student Activities (ASA)—a percentage that was in line with the student population at the time.

¹ 2012 New Student Survey

² Provided by the registrar

³ 2014 Undergraduate Experience Survey

Despite their successes in academics, research and leadership, females at MIT report being less confident than their male peers. Freshman female students are less likely to agree that they are a “capable student, at least on an equal plane with others”^{1,4} (Fig. 1). By senior year, survey responses indicate a substantially greater decrease for females than for males. This suggests that MIT has a negative effect on the confidence of female students. Additionally, females are significantly more likely to believe that “others do not think [they] belong at MIT.”⁴

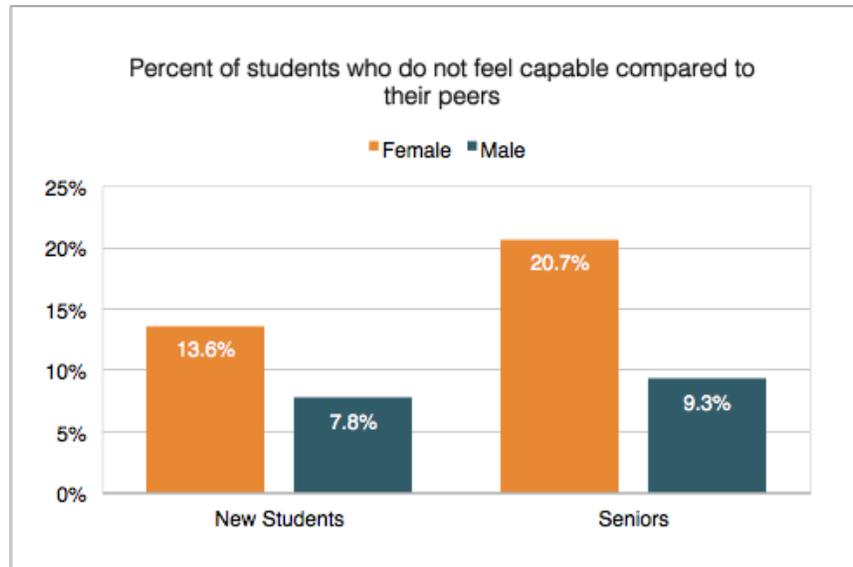


Figure 1. Percent of students who strongly disagree, disagree, or are neither agree nor disagree with the statement: I am a capable student, at least on equal plane with others. Average response of females is significantly lower than males ($p < 0.10$). Taken from 2012 New Student Survey and 2012 Senior Survey

The difference in confidence levels may be attributed to the ways students perceive their treatment at MIT. Females are less likely to agree that, “The climate and opportunities for female students at MIT are at least as good as those for male students”⁵ (Fig. 2). They are also less likely to agree that they are “given due credit for the work [they] do outside of academics,”³ despite being as involved on campus as their male counterparts. Underrepresented Minority (URM) women, in particular, believe they are acknowledged less than their Caucasian female or URM male peers. In order to better understand these differences, it is important to explore the ways in which females and males measure success and recognition. As an example, females are more likely to agree with, “I measure my success by the positive feedback I receive from faculty.”^{1,4}

Overall, females rate the extent to which their experiences at MIT contributed to career or work related knowledge and skills lower than their male peers. This may be the result of females and males having different career goals. For example, females respect public service leaders significantly more than their male peers do.³ In addition, males are more likely to have “No advanced degree planned,” whereas females are more likely to go to medical school.⁴

⁴ 2012 Senior Survey

⁵ 2013 Student Quality of Life Survey

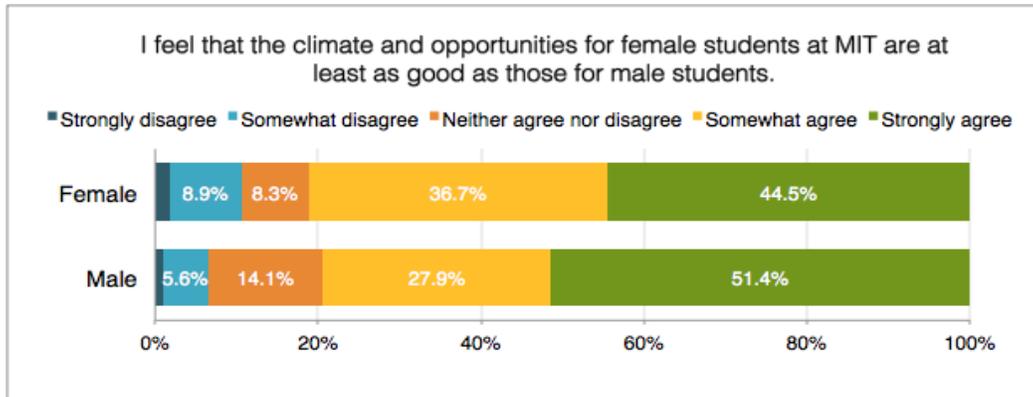


Figure 2. Average response of females is significantly lower than males ($p < 0.10$). Data taken from the 2013 Student Quality of Life Survey.

While on the surface it may seem that gender does not affect students' time at the Institute, there are many experiences at MIT that are, in fact, gendered. It is crucial for MIT to promote gender equality to uphold the meritocracy on which members of the MIT community pride themselves. The *Recommendations* chapter of this report contains policies and programs that can be implemented to address these differences. These include: developing workshops to help reduce the differences in technical experience among incoming freshmen, and restructuring the advising program to strengthen the relationship between faculty and students. We believe that implementing these recommendations will promote a more equitable environment for all people on campus.