

# UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES

## GENDER ATTITUDES AT BYU

Despite the environment of political correctness there still exists a “glass ceiling effect” in many professions, where women make up the majority of the workforce but males dominate the managerial positions. As a student of one of those professions, Alexis Allen wanted to know how attitudes about gender roles in the workplace affected her.

“After reading about the nationwide study of public relations students and their career-related gender views, I immediately started to internalize the issue,” says Allen. She saw the direct implications of the study to her—a woman soon to be out in the real world. However, she also wanted to know what kind of attitudes permeated in the environment where she lived and studied, with other students she would be competing with for jobs and getting along with as co-workers.

Allen also recognized the role she has occupied as a Latter-Day Saint woman. “I don’t even have a family of my own yet, but I can already feel myself beginning the unique, delicate balancing act of LDS women around the world; women who love their families and the gospel and want to raise their children in righteousness, but who also have the capacity to serve their communities in a professional role.”

She was extremely interested in learning about the attitudes her peers held, particularly the male students she sat in classes with. With the help of her mentor, Dr. Shane Reese and several other professors, Allen created a survey that she distributed to approximately 100 male and female students across five Communications majors at Brigham Young University. The junior adapted her survey model from a similar study conducted by Dr. Betty Farmer of Western Carolina University. The questionnaire polled students on such issues as expected duties, salary, advancement and the perception of women as managers. She also asked students what their plans were following graduation.

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As important as the study's results are to Allen, the experience of doing a research project that she established is just as valuable. "How can you effectively communicate your client's message if you have no idea what the audiences for that message are like?" she poses. "The ability to do accurate research is key in the ultra-competitive world of PR."

Allen first heard about the ORCA-sponsored mentoring experiences from fellow classmates as early as her freshman year. "But I didn't think I was scientifically minded enough to be a real competitor in the grant selection process," she admits. But an honors research course she enrolled in changed her view. The course's professor, Dr. Reese, told her and other students that their work could qualify for an ORCA scholarship. Allen says, "I remember thinking, I'm going to invest the hours and effort into this no matter what, so I may as well see if I can receive some monetary compensation for my work as well as the knowledge I'll gain, and it happened."

The grant paid off for Allen in several ways. After learning about the costs for creating, reproducing and distributing the six-page survey she says she almost gave up doing the project. She is also grateful to the professors who let her interrupt their classes to explain and pass out the survey to a sample of students. "Dr. Reese was my official mentor, but I actually had this network of experienced, knowledgeable adult advisors—10 or more—who showed me once again that BYU faculty and staff care about their students."



**So many offers, so little time:** After a successful research project and internship this summer Allen now has multiple career options — even before she begins her senior year.

She visited with the Statistics instructor several times a week while working on the project. "He was always willing to meet with me. My meetings with him gave me confidence, and he was always there to help me make sure I was conducting research in a mathematically sound way."

"Dr. (Steve) Thomsen was also wonderful, especially considering I basically showed up at his office one day and asked for help," she says of the Communications professor who helped point her in the right directions in the department. "It was intimidating at first to step into their offices and chat with them," she says about the many instructors she worked with. "But I learned that they really wanted to help me as a student."

"Our faculty members are an invaluable resource, and I don't think enough students take advantage of that."

She says her interest in research was sparked by a question. “I guess that’s what starts all research; an inquisitiveness, a desire to understand.” She knows her study won’t answer the overall question of women’s versus men’s roles, however, she states that, “My desire to separate certainty from stereotype in my small environment reminded me that this study was about me, in a way. That it was for me and for BYU women like me. That personal anchor to this project made it come alive for me, and it made all the extra work worth it, especially since I had started it for the sake of the research in the first place.”

The practice of doing research has caused her to want to investigate other areas where people are concerned. “Now, when I have a question about an issue, I start to map out the scientific way to find the answer,” she says. “Who would I survey? How would I analyze the data? Research is how we find answers to our questions, and anyone with the right tools can do it.”

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Her study yielded no significant differences between male and female attitudes on gender roles in the workplace, a noticeably different result than elsewhere around the country. “I personally came to realize that gender issues aren’t really a big deal to most of us, and maybe that is a blessing that comes with our understanding of men’s and women’s divine roles and our eternal equality. We respect each other.”

But she also noticed something else about women at the university: “I had this sense that the women of BYU have a plan, no matter what their marital situation is currently. I saw these women

going out into their respective careers and graduate programs alongside their male BYU graduates, and I saw them positively impacting their environments as they opted to work, study, or stay home and rear their children. And I saw them having just as powerful an impact as their fellow male BYU graduates—a different kind of impact, maybe, but powerful just the same.”