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Attracting Media: Sustaining Impact

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In 1992, under the sponsorship of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), a group of researchers at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women researched and wrote *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (HSSG),¹ a survey of 1,300 studies focused on how gender affects education in public K-12 schools in the United States.

This academic study has had an unusual life story. Unlike most studies of its type, which are circulated mainly among other academics, HSSG received widespread public attention and media coverage. It affected popular opinion, school programs, and education legislation. Fifteen years after its publication, HSSG is still cited in the press and academic publications as a source for information on gender bias in K-12 education.

Why did this study become a cultural touchstone? How can other researchers frame their work so that it resonates with the public? The following may help answer these questions.

Good Planning

HSSG was part of a larger AAUW plan. In 1991 the AAUW funded a national survey, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*,² which received a significant amount of media coverage. This survey found that after puberty girls had lower self-esteem than younger girls. By following up this survey a year later with HSSG, the AAUW built on the public's interest with data on educational inequities confronting girls. Furthermore, the combination of two well-known women's organizations, AAUW and Wellesley, gave credibility and visibility to the findings.

Key Player Involvement

Prominent educational organizations were a part of HSSG from the beginning. Key policy makers were interviewed as part of the data collection process and the staff of Council of Chief State School Officers wrote one of the appendices. HSSG was introduced to national



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¹Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (1992). *The AAUW Report: How Schools Shortchange Girls*. Washington, DC: AAUW

²AAUW (1991). *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*. Washington, DC: AAUW.

educational organizations at a Washington DC seminar targeting them and a national mailing on HSSG was sent out to a wide variety of educational groups.

A Controversial Title

The title, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, echoed the title of the earlier survey, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* and was developed by the AAUW to be controversial and startling. The declaration that girls were being shortchanged attracted and energized both advocates and the public, including many who had assumed that the “girl problem” had already been solved.

Good Timing

The newly-elected Clinton Administration rekindled an interest in public education, as well as issues facing minorities and women. The Podesta Group, the PR firm who represented the AAUW during the HSSG study, had connections within the Clinton Administration and the Democratic Party. Politicians wanted sound evidence to back bills about gender equity in school and HSSG provided some of this data.

Grass Roots Support

AAUW encouraged its hundreds of local chapters to build on the issues raised by HSSG by doing projects, writing letters, and sending press releases to local papers, as well as working directly with schools. This helped to increase local media coverage of HSSG and the issues it raised. A variety of other women’s organizations, including some Wellesley College Alumnae clubs, also spread the word about HSSG, lobbying their local schools, starting their own projects, and in some cases working at the state and national levels, again increasing media interest.

Backlash Management

HSSG created controversy and generated a significant backlash in the media. Much of the backlash was based on untruths—including the falsehood that HSSG was only about girls. Concepts such as “the war against boys” gained prominence. However, challenging and rebutting the backlash helped to generate new interest and kept the story fresh.

Continued Follow-up

The two organizations involved in the study, AAUW and Wellesley Center for Research on Women, both continued with follow-up efforts in the years after publication.

- ◆ Members of the Wellesley team spent a significant amount of time for the next few years giving speeches and doing workshops on topics related to HSSG for a wide range of audiences, ranging from professional associations to local school districts.
- ◆ HSSG was published commercially in 1995 and was thus available more widely than such reports usually are.³
- ◆ The paperback publisher marketed HSSG to libraries.
- ◆ The Ford Foundation funded the Wellesley Center to translate HSSG into Chinese, French, and Spanish for free distribution to attendees at the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women Beijing, China.

³Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (1995). *How Schools Shortchange Girls: The AAUW Report*. New York: Marlowe and Company.