

WOMEN NAMED VIRGINIA

By David A. Watson, Ph.D.

Ask individuals who have enjoyed success in life to name their greatest influences, and they will likely mention (in addition to one or both parents) a teacher or mentor. They may also tell you that they continue to be impacted by individuals throughout their careers. I know this is true for me, and further, that some of these folks have been, and continue to be, women. Ironically, aside from my spouse, three of the most prominent have been named Virginia. I'll elaborate on these Virginias momentarily, but first, let's briefly look at the success of women in building careers in our society.

First, in a paper to the Population Association of America, Jennifer Glass points out that women continue to bear much of the burden of caring for children, even while their earnings have become increasingly important to the economic well-being of families. In dual-income families where children are present, Mom's earnings now represent, on average, more than 40% of total household income. In single-mother homes, this paycheck is even more central to the welfare of the group. Unfortunately, among all women, it is mothers whose wages have grown slowest. Career progression, and therefore raises, depend on physical presence in the workplace, something quite often made very difficult by child-bearing. Sandra Hofferth, from the University of Michigan, reports that children have less access to their mothers as Mom works more hours outside the home, yet this does not seem to decrease the time kids "directly engage" with their mothers. The same can not be said, however, for fathers, who, as they work more, spend less time with their children. It is true, though, that as both moms and dads become more

educated and increase their earnings, they do spend more time with their children.

Economists Kate Antonovics and Arthur Goldberger of the University of California San

Diego have attempted to answer the question “Do educated women make bad mothers?”

A previous study had concluded that raising the educational level of one generation might in fact lower the academic achievement of the next; the work of these economists casts doubt on such a conclusion, and suggests this may not be the case.

Can we discern anything regarding the future of women’s participation in the workforce? Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that 35 years ago, in 1970, nearly 60 % of students enrolled in higher education were male. By 1980, slightly more than 50 % were women, a surprising increase. Almost 55 % of college students were female by 1990, and in 2003, the most recent year for which good data exist, roughly 57 % were women. This ratio of the genders in higher education is projected by the NCES to remain stable over the next five years. Even while this trend suggests that substantial numbers of young women will acquire education beyond high school over the coming years, it does not predict better wages for them or that our society is on the verge of optimizing this enhanced stream of human capital. If we look a bit further, the statistics also tell us that the numbers of women entering graduate and professional schools is also growing steadily. Locally, at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston some 57 % of doctoral graduate students are currently women, as are half of medical students. Nationally, very nearly 50 % of medical students are now women. This is the good news, i.e. that many women are now in the pipeline to become scientific and medical professionals. The bad news, as pointed out recently by Boston Globe columnist Ellen Goodman, is that only one in three women with Ph.D.s

who hold tenure-track jobs in academe ever become mothers. What can be done?

Nothing short of a sea-change will do, really, at least with regard to the recognition by all of society that professional accomplishment by women is compatible with motherhood, and that bearing children is a task only half of us can shoulder. Let's acknowledge that no gender difference exists in brain capacity, and that we'll never maximize our collective intellectual output until we stop penalizing half the population over what is a simple biological fact.

Before there was a Ms. Frizzle and a Magic School Bus, there was a little old gray-haired lady named Virginia Parrett, a junior high school science teacher in a tiny Midwestern hamlet. She was patient but firm, and enthusiastic in promoting science to me as a career path. More recently, another graying Virginia (this time Trchalek) showed me how to lead a group of leaders, again forcefully but also gently, and always with exuberance. Now there is (Emily) Virginia Watson, named for the first of the Virginias. This one is my daughter, but no matter, I'm still learning. For example, she's taught me: that this generation of girls doesn't just hope for equality of opportunity, they expect it; that they don't just believe they might be as smart as the boys, but that they absolutely are; and that they don't simply consider that they might possibly achieve to the same levels as men, but that they most certainly will. I only hope (in a grandfatherly way) that as a society we figure out how to enable for them both professional achievement and child-rearing.