THE DAILY CLIPS

June 21, 2007

News, commentary, and opinion
compiled by the East Carolina University News Bureau from:

The Greenville Daily Reflector
The Raleigh News & Observer
The New York Times
The Wall Street Journal
USA Today
The Charlotte Observer
The Fayetteville Observer
The Greensboro News & Record
Newsweek
U.S. News & World Report
Business Week
Time

East Carolina University News Bureau
E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu  Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
252-328-6481 FAX: 252-328-6300
The bugs of summer light up the sky

Today marks the official beginning of the summer season.

By Jimmy Ryals
The Daily Reflector

The firefly is no fly.
The lightning bug is no bug.
The glowworm is no worm.
Whatever you call it, the flashy, flying insect is a beetle, part of the insect order Coleoptera. It's also a harbinger of summer, which officially starts today.

The abundance of fireflies this time of year is a product of their life cycle, said Hal Daniel, a professor of biology at East Carolina University. Beetles lay eggs in the spring after a dormant winter. The eggs hatch larvae shortly thereafter, and lightning bugs reach their primes in the summer. There are roughly 2,000 types of fireflies in the world, Daniel said. Locally, two are dominant: Photuris pennsylvanica and Photinus scintillans.

During sticky, hot summers, the southeastern United States offers ideal conditions for lightning bugs.

“They like the warm, humid air,” Daniel said.
Forests, where trees tend to hold moist air in, are particularly popular. The beetles also flock to less-developed areas, where there is less man-made light, he said.

The lightning bug's natural illumination — its bioluminescence — is the product of chemical interactions in a firefly's belly. The flash serves two purposes, Daniel said. It's a sign to would-be predators that the firefly would make a poor meal. In the insect world, bright colors indicate that a bug carries toxic chemicals, Daniel said.

The flash also draws potential mates. Female lightning bugs tend to seek males capable of quick, repeated flashes, Daniel said.

But for some unlucky males, the flash can lead to an untimely death.

One type of female firefly, from the genus Photurus, has developed a deadly mimicking ability, Daniel said. It responds to the mating flashes of smaller males by copying the answers of interested females. The male approaches, expecting a rendezvous. Instead, he becomes dinner.

“The poor horny thing gets coaxed into thinking he’s seeing a receptive female of his own species. My feminist biology students of course love that,” Daniel said. “Here’s a male thinking only of sex, only to get eaten. I mean, that’s got poetry.”

Fireflies have been slow to appear this season, said Daniel, who tracks the annual start of firefly season. They usually emerge in May, but Daniel suggested an Easter cold snap slowed their arrival this year.

Still, fireflies should be out en masse by now, particularly after Wednesday’s rainfall, Daniel said. Heavy rains increase humidity and draw out more lightning bugs.

Children pursuing the insects of summer should do it...
ECU hires new golf coach

Former East Carolina men’s and women’s golf coach Kevin Williams has re-joined the Pirate athletics department, accepting the position as head women’s golf coach.

Williams, who became the Lady Pirates’ first head coach in 2000, returns to his alma mater after spending the past 18 months as the head golf professional at Walnut Creek Country Club in Goldsboro.

He replaces Kim Lewellen, who left to take the head women’s golf position at Virginia.
Study estimates N.C. coastline’s climate-change bill

For the first time, researchers have estimated what projected climate changes could cost North Carolina in terms of tourism, recreation and property losses. The study, led by the National Commission on Energy Policy, was conducted by economists at three North Carolina universities and a research institute in Germany.

PROPERTY LOSSES

$6.9 BILLION: The value of property in four counties that would be vulnerable to higher sea levels over the next 75 years. The economists studied New Hanover, Dare, Carteret and Bertie counties, which provided a cross section of coastal areas, some highly developed and others more rural.

$2.7 BILLION: The highest estimate of residential property value at risk of submersion in Dare County alone.

RECREATION AND TOURISM

$3.9 BILLION: The projected coastal recreation spending that would be lost by 2080 at the state’s southern beaches as sea levels rise. As beaches narrow, spending on beach trips would fall.

85 FEET: The width of Atlantic Beach in 2030. The Carteret County town’s beach is currently 135 feet wide. By 2080, it wouldn’t exist. Fourteen of 17 swimming beaches would be eroded away, unless preservation efforts are undertaken.

BUSINESS AND AGRICULTURE

$157 MILLION: The increased amount businesses would lose per hurricane in 2080. Assuming hurricanes are no more frequent, but are more powerful, cumulative losses from 2004 to 2080 in the four counties could total $1.44 billion.

$800 MILLION: What a Category 3 hurricane costs now in agricultural losses. The study’s authors said lower-level hurricanes will become more intense and cost more.
Climate change could hit homes, beaches, business

BY WADE RAWLINS
STAFF WRITER

Fourteen of the 17 beaches from Brunswick County to Carteret County could be eroded away by 2080, leaving beachgoers no place to plant their umbrellas and translating into a loss of $3.9 billion, researchers reported Wednesday.

For the first time, researchers have put a dollar estimate on lost tourism, recreation and property damage in North Carolina from the projected impact of climate change. The bipartisan National Commission on Energy Policy funded the study.

Economists at three North Carolina universities and Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany said the study showed that as climate change causes submergence of coastal areas and increased erosion, North Carolina will endure billions of dollars in property damage, lost tourism and disruption to coastal businesses.

"Coastal North Carolina has been identified as one of the United States' most vulnerable regions to climate change," said Ben Poulter, a Duke University-trained landscape ecologist at the Potsdam Institute.

Scientists predict that the buildup of carbon dioxide gas in the atmosphere will lead to higher global temperatures, though the rate and extent of change remains a topic of debate. A panel of international scientists projects that polar ice will melt, resulting in seas rising 7 to 30 inches by 2100.

More than 2,000 square miles of Eastern North Carolina is no more than 3 feet above sea level, putting it at risk of being submerged, the researchers said.

"Even a relatively small rise — a 1-foot rise — would have a long reach into the interior of North Carolina," said John Whitehead, an economist at Appalachian State University and co-author of the study. "That will affect a lot of property."

Real estate

To assess impacts on real estate values, the study focused on New Hanover, Dare, Carteret and Bertie counties for a cross-section of the state's coast. The counties included highly developed shoreline and more rural areas.

Okmyung "Paul" Bin, an economist at East Carolina University and co-author, said that increasing coastal development, coupled with soaring property values, has created greater vulnerability to sea level rise.

Bin projected losses of $6.9 billion in the four counties as land becomes permanently inundated. The most significant losses would hit the northern counties, where sea level rise is magnified by a natural process in which the land is gradually sinking. The estimated residential property value at risk in Dare County ranged from $242 million to $2.7 billion, Bin said.

He said that Dare would be most heavily affected, and that Carteret would also have a substantial impact. He said New Hanover and Bertie counties would see relatively small impacts.

Coastal industries

In addition, the scientists said coastal industries, including recreational fishing and beach tourism, would be hit hard by higher sea levels and hurricanes.

Len Pietrafesa, a professor of oceanic and atmospheric sciences at N.C. State University, who did not participate in the study, said the costs raised in the study need to be presented to the public and to policymakers.

"It's sort of a reality check to say this is what it's going to cost the state," said Pietrafesa, who added that he was not shocked by the numbers. "Can the state afford this? I believe it's a needed exercise to put the costs of maintaining or rebuilding coastal areas, which will be hit by storms, into the perspective of how we're going to be able to absorb these costs as a state and nation."

The study predicted that 17 recreational swimming beaches from Sunset Beach in Brunswick County to Atlantic Beach in Carteret County would narrow in the next 25 years, and 14 would no longer be usable for recreation by 2080. The study did not cover the state's northern beaches.

"Sea level rise is projected to totally eliminate a number of beaches in North Carolina, a number of barrier islands in North Carolina," Whitehead said.

As beaches narrow, Whitehead said, people would spend less time and money at the coast. He estimated that would cost $3.9 billion over the next 75 years.

The researchers assumed that climate change would also cause lower-category hurricanes to intensify, although that remains hotly debated. Some scientists have correlated warming oceans with more intense storms, while others say that hurricane cycles are not linked to global warming and occur naturally.

Hurricane losses

Chris Dumas, a UNC-Wilmington economist and co-author, estimated that business losses in New Hanover, Dare, Carteret and Bertie counties associated with more severe Category 3 hurricanes could rise by $34 million per storm by 2080. The researchers projected that hurricanes could cause $157 million in damages per storm by 2080.

Whitehead, of Appalachian State University, said he hoped the research would help policymakers understand the benefits and avoid costs of adopting policies to address climate change.

"Right now, it seems that people are focusing on the costs of addressing climate change," Whitehead said. "The benefits of implementing climate change policy would occur further down the road, which makes them easier to ignore or postpone. "Our numbers are the cost of doing nothing or the benefit of doing something," Whitehead said.
Training before storms strike

Emergency managers learn new way to track hurricanes

BY TIM SIMMONS
STAFF WRITER

KINSTON – As anyone who has ever bought a new gadget knows, it often helps to read the directions before the day you really need it to work.

This is especially true for emergency management officials who track and respond to hurricanes.

So on a muggy Wednesday morning when the biggest weather threat was a passing thunderstorm, Jessica Proud of the Renaissance Computing Institute repeatedly encouraged emergency managers to become familiar with something called NC-First.

Designed by the Chapel Hill-based institute, NC-First is the state’s answer to complaints from emergency workers that getting local weather data during major storms can at times be clunky and time-consuming.

“We aren’t giving you new information to learn,” Proud told the group of about a dozen gathered at the training center of the N.C. Global TransPark. “We are just giving it to you in a form that is easier to interpret.”

Initial reviews from the group, the first to be trained, were positive. Instead of requiring emergency managers to sort through a variety of web pages with separate passwords and user names, NC-First offers the same information through a single site.

The pages work off a template that offers four quick snapshots of a major storm. Those tracking hurricanes, for example, view quadrants containing satellite images, radar images, text forecasts and ground observations of wind speed and temperatures.

A drop-down menu to the left of the quadrants offers a long list of options, such as graphics about accumulated rainfall graphics and status reports on river flooding.

While the template remains the same for all emergency managers, the information inside changes depending on the area of the state being tracked.

That allows users in multiple cities to tailor data from the same storm for their respective areas of the state.

All of the information is streamed in real time.

The Renaissance Computing Institute, known as RENCI, will add to its offerings soon.

Detailed weather data on severe thunderstorms and tornadoes should be ready within a few weeks, Proud said. Information about winter storms and forest fires will follow.

RENCI is a partnership involving Duke University, N.C. State University and UNC-Chapel Hill. It brings together computing, data and network technologies that none of the universities could match separately.

It was founded in 2004 with the goal of using technology to assist and reshape the state’s economy. One focus of that work is improving emergency management.

The institute did not calculate a specific cost for NC-First, which took about six months to develop. RENCI receives about $11 million a year from the state for a wide range of projects.

That meant Proud could quickly answer Drew Guthrie of Carteret County when he asked whether emergency workers would have to pay for NC-First.

“You already did,” Proud said.

Guthrie didn’t seem to mind, joining others who offered a few suggestions for the new program while praising the effort so far.

“At least I paid for something I can use,” Guthrie said.

But it will work best, Proud reminded them, if they use it now — before Chantal, Dean, Erin or some other tropical storm of 2007 decides to visit North Carolina as a full-blown hurricane.
College Leaders Push for Carbon Neutrality

By CLAUDIA H. DEUTSCH

Cape Cod Community College is erecting a wind turbine and will soon install solar panels. The dining halls at Furman University in Greenville, S.C., are offering more fresh produce from local farms. Arizona State University is distributing free bus passes to every student, employee and faculty member.

The list of universities and colleges putting up green buildings, buying alternative energy and otherwise shelling out money to green their campuses gets longer every day. And yesterday many of them put their mouths where their money is.

At a press conference in Washington, representatives of 284 colleges introduced the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment — essentially, a pledge to make their operations carbon neutral. They promised to eliminate or offset every iota of greenhouse gases resulting from light bulbs in their buildings, from flights and car trips by their faculty, even from the transportation of food to their dining halls. And they also promised to lobby other college leaders to sign the pledge.

"We want to galvanize a national commitment to the issues related to climate change," said David Shi, Furman’s president.

Signers include Ivy League institutions like Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, small elite colleges like Bowdoin, community colleges and public universities.

"Universities are huge institutions with huge carbon footprints, but they also are laboratories for concepts of sustainability," said Michael Crow, the president of Arizona State and a leader in this effort.

David Skorton, the president of Cornell, put it more colorfully: "We’re saying that sustainability is no longer an elective.

In some ways, the pledge is more symbolic than substantive. Most studies show that institutions of higher education generate, at most, 3 percent of the greenhouse gases in the United States. And many, if not most, of those who have signed already run green campuses.

Still, the pledge spells out concrete actions. Each institution plans to analyze its own carbon footprint, probably within the next two years, and then set specific strategies and a timetable to neutralize it. Each also promises to create a steering committee of students, faculty and staff to oversee the effort. The leaders plan to meet regularly to swap ideas, and to do so through the Web as well.

The institutions will define carbon neutrality for themselves — deciding, for example, whether to consider emissions from student vehicles as part of a carbon footprint. No institution has set a firm deadline for achieving total carbon neutrality.

Students say the initiative is long overdue. The Energy Action Coalition, a nonprofit group, has 70 full-time people helping students lobby their presidents to sign. "We are really excited to see presidents mount a top-down effort," said Billy Parish, the coalition coordinator.

The signers say the pledge will have an impact not only on their own campuses but also on the campuses of their peers and on the companies or institutions where their graduates end up.

"We can show students how to live in a more energy efficient way, and what we teach them they will eventually teach their employers," said Kathleen Schatzberg, the president of Cape Cod Community College, who said she had persuaded 15 other college presidents in Massachusetts to sign the pledge.

Mr. Skorton of Cornell enumerates dozens of projects and courses on sustainability at Cornell that he wants other universities to know about. "University presidents don’t use the bully pulpit nearly enough," he said.

Environmentalists agree. "Higher education is a $320-billion-a-year industry," said Lee Bodner, the executive director of ecoAmerica, an environmental group that helped start the initiative. "When colleges say sustainability is important, it sends a signal to the companies that supply them with goods and services."

Meanwhile, campuses are reacting. "When facilities managers and professors see their president stand up and pledge, they start reallocating budgets," said Emma Stewart, the director of environmental strategy for the nonprofit group Business for Social Responsibility.

For example, the University of Colorado at Boulder is negotiating contracts to derive all its electricity from green sources like windmills and solar panels and is working with students on a system to slash waste of all kinds.

Dave Newport, the director of the university’s environmental center, said none of that would have gotten off the ground if its chancellor had not signed the pledge.

"Six months ago I couldn’t have even gotten a meeting with the leadership to discuss the idea," he said. "Before, we were paddling a steamship with canoe paddles, but now it’s full speed ahead."
Some Colleges to Drop Out of U.S. News Rankings

By ALAN FINDER

ANNAPOLIS, Md., June 19 — The presidents of dozens of liberal arts colleges have decided to stop participating in the annual college rankings by U.S. News and World Report.

The decision was announced Tuesday at the end of an annual meeting of the Annapolis Group, a loose association of liberal arts colleges. After two days of private meetings here, the organization released a statement that said a majority of the 80 presidents attending had “expressed their intent not to participate in the annual U.S. News survey.”

The commitment, which some college presidents said was made by a large majority of participants, represents the most significant challenge yet to the rankings, adding colleges like Barnard, Sarah Lawrence and Kenyon to a growing rebellion against the magazine, participants said.

U.S. News says it provides a valuable service to parents and students in its yearly evaluations, which are based on factors that include graduation and retention rates, assessments by competitors, selectivity and faculty resources. Critics say the ranking system lacks rigor and has had a harmful effect on educational priorities, encouraging colleges to do things like soliciting more applicants and then rejecting them, to move up the list.

“We really want to reclaim the high ground on this discussion,” said Katherine Will, the president of Gettysburg College and the incoming president of the Annapolis Group. “We should be defining the conversation, not a magazine that uses us for its business plan.” The association did not take a formal vote and each college will make its own decision, Dr. Will said.

The members of the Annapolis Group also decided to develop their own system of comparing institutions. The group intends to work with other higher education organizations to come up with a common format with comparable data.

“They will do what they will do,” Michele Tolela Myers, president of Sarah Lawrence College, said of U.S. News and World Report. “We will do what we will do. And we want to do it in a principled way.”

Brian Kelly, the editor of U.S. News, said the magazine applauded any effort to come up with new data. “If they come up with some new data, fine,” Mr. Kelly said. He was also conciliatory toward the presidents who said they would no longer cooperate with the magazine. “If a few presidents don’t want to participate we understand,” he said.

Mr. Kelly said more than 50 percent of the presidents, provosts and admission deans who were sent the annual survey of colleges’ reputations continued to fill it out. “We think the vast majority of presidents and academics are still supporting the survey,” he said.
He left no doubt that the magazine would continue to produce its annual rankings. “We take our critics seriously, but we also think our ranking is valuable,” he said.

The decision by the Annapolis Group comes on the heels of an effort this spring by a dozen college presidents, several of whom belong to the association, urging colleges to pledge not to participate in a critical section of the U.S. News rankings — a survey in which its asks presidents and other senior academic officers to rate the reputations of other colleges and universities. That survey is weighed more heavily in the magazine’s rankings than any other factor.

Many presidents who favor no longer participating in the U.S. News rankings said they expected the magazine to be able to continue to produce its annual rankings because much of the data on things like admission and graduation rates are publicly available. Colleges report most of that data to the federal Department of Education.

But many presidents said it was time to disengage from the magazine. “Frankly, it had bubbled up to the point of, why should we do this work for them?” said Judith P. Shapiro, the president of Barnard College. “It is a way of saying, this is not our project.”

Other college presidents who attended the meeting were more cautious. Anthony Marx, the president of Amherst, which is ranked second among liberal arts colleges, said he was not ready to stop cooperating with U.S. News and wanted to continue to discuss the issue.

Lloyd Thacker, the executive director of the Education Conservancy, a nonprofit group that is campaignin to reduce the impact of rankings on college choice, was invited to talk with the presidents at the meeting. Mr. Thacker said he was heartened by the decisions, adding, “I think it gave permission to those president who were sitting on the fence to act in the public interest.”
Admittedly Unequal

Any colleges are rejecting women at rates drastically higher than those for men.

By Alex Kingsbury

The University of Richmond, like many small liberal arts colleges, has its roots in single-sex education. The campus, which sits on a picturesque 360 acres of woodland a few miles outside the Virginia state capital, was once two schools: Westhampton and Richmond colleges, situated on opposite sides of a small lake. The campuses merged around the turn of the 20th century, creating the coed institution that exists today. Despite— and partly because of—its history, the delicate balance between men and women at Richmond has always been a tricky thing to manage.

These days, the student body is 49 percent male and 51 percent female—a ratio that the college insists is determined by the availability of on-campus housing. Maintaining that equilibrium, however, has in the past few years meant rejecting many more female applicants than male ones. In practical terms, in the past decade, female applicants have faced an admissions rate that is an average 15 percentage points lower than that of their male peers just for the sake of keeping that girl-boy balance.

"From a philosophical standpoint, we've really discussed the benefits of keeping it about equal," says Marilyn Hesser, a senior associate director of admissions at Richmond. "The board of trustees has said that the admissions office can go as far as 55-45 [women to men]." Male and female applicants to the school have test scores that are virtually the same, she says. "Was [the male applicant's] high school GPA a little lower? Perhaps."

The University of Richmond is by no means unique in its challenge to keep the number of men and women enrolled roughly equal in the face of a dramatically changing pool of applicants. Nor is it the school where the gap in admissions rates is the most pronounced. Using undergraduate admissions rate data collected from more than 1,400 four-year colleges and universities that participate in the magazine's rankings, U.S. News has found that over the past 10 years many schools are maintaining their gender balance by admitting men and women at sometimes drastically different rates.

Better students. The schools that are most competitive—Harvard, Duke, and Rice, for example—have so many applicants and so many high achievers that they naturally maintain balanced student bodies by skimming the cream of the crop. But in the tier of selective colleges just below them, maintaining gender equity on some campuses appears to require a thumb on the scale in favor of boys. It's at these schools, including Pomona, Boston College, Wesleyan University, Tufts, and the College of William and Mary, that the gap in admit rates is particularly acute.

The reason for these lower admissions rates for female students is simple, if bitterly ironic: From the early grades on up, girls tend to be better students. By the time college admissions come into the picture, many watchers of the "boy gap" agree, it's too late for the lads to catch up on their own. Indeed, beginning in those formative K-12 years, girls watch less television, spend less time playing sports, and are far less likely to find themselves in detention. They are more likely to participate in drama, art, and music classes—extracurriculars that are catnip for admissions officers. Across the board, girls study more, score better, and are less likely to be placed in special education classes.

Females graduate from high school at a slightly higher rate than men and are more likely to forgo the workforce for an advanced degree. All of these factors help explain why the percentage of women in higher education has been steadily growing: From rough parity in 1980, women made up 57 percent of the 16.6 million American collegegoers in 2006. By 2010, the Department of Education expects the ratio to be around 60 to 40. In other words, that is the boys' side of the admissions scale will have to press much harder in the coming years to keep those male dormitories at the University of Richmond and other campuses across the country fully populated.

Natural selection. The academic success of women should be good news, especial-

ly considering the fact that just a generation ago women were barred from some of the country's best universities: Boston College, Johns Hopkins, the University of Virginia, Brown, Dartmouth, Notre Dame, and Harvard weren't fully coeducational until the 1970s. (Men, meanwhile, were barred from Radcliffe, Barnard, and Smith, among others.) The problem is that while women have made dramatic progress, men have not kept pace and are now increasingly outnumbered in higher education.

At the universities that attract the most applicants, balancing the boy and girl enrollment numbers appears to happen naturally based on the admissions data. At Harvard University, for example, the pool of more than 22,000 applicants has remained equally divided between men and women, meaning that both sexes are admitted at an equal—if dauntingly low—9 percent. Harvard has seen its percentage of female undergraduates increase steadily over the past decade from 46 percent in 1997 to 49 percent in 2006. Princeton, Stanford, Rice, Duke, and Yale universities are in the same boat; ditto for the elite liberal arts colleges such as Amherst, Williams, and Middlebury.

Where girls face the biggest challenge is at small liberal arts colleges, like the University of Richmond and Kenyon College in Ohio. An op-ed entitled "To All the Girls I've Rejected," published in the New York Times last year, set the college admissions world atwitter when it outlined the reality of what most officers had been seeing for years. "The fat acceptance envelope is simply more elusive for today's accomplished young women," wrote Jennifer Delahunty Britz, the dean of admissions at Kenyon, which, according to the U.S. News data, is not even among the schools that most heavily favor boys in their admissions process.

An hour's drive east of the University of Richmond, the College of William and Mary also is altering its admissions rates to achieve gender balance, if not parity. In the past decade, the school's portion of women in the undergraduate body has risen from 50 percent to 54 percent. Overall, because of the rising number of students applying to colleges, the admissions rates for both men and women at William
and Mary have plummeted, from 51 percent for men and 43 percent for women in 1997 to 44 and 26 percent in 2006. Over that period, men had an admittance rate of 12 percentage points higher than their female counterparts had.

Outnumbered. Colleges, meanwhile, contend that their schools are best served by keeping things balanced. "I don't think that's an issue of equity; it's an issue of institutional prerogative [to create] a community that will best serve both the men and the women who elect to be members of that community," says Henry Broaddus, director of admission at William and Mary. "Even women who enroll... expect to see men on campus. It's not the College of Mary and Mary; it's the College of William and Mary."

Indeed, says sophomore Carrie Bruner, it's important to have men on campus in and outside of the classroom. "Males have perspectives to offer that a woman doesn't have," she says. She also says that she and her female classmates do sometimes joke about a shortage of men to take to dances. And indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that once a campus reaches, say, a 60-to-40 split in favor of either gender, the college becomes less attractive to applicants of both sexes. "Frankly, students care about the dating scene on campus, and no one wants to be outnumbered," says Bari Norman, a former admissions counselor at Barnard College who now runs mycollegecounselor.com.

Some traditionally male-dominated schools are refocusing on the influx of women. Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., went coed in 1970 and has tried to attract women ever since, a challenge because one of the college's strengths is its engineering program, a discipline in which women have been historically underrepresented. As the school approached and finally reached gender parity in 2000, its applications from both girls and boys soared.

Nationally, the picture is more nuanced than the William and Mary examples. Women are not excluded en masse from higher education. In fact, they do fill the majority of seats there. And since most colleges are "open admission," meaning that they admit all or nearly all qualified applicants, women have a higher overall admissions rate than men. "At the national level, are we looking at a system that is excluding capable women from higher education? And the answer to that is clearly no," says Broaddus. "Even though there is a lot of focus on the highly selective places, there are still ample higher education opportunities available to qualified students."

It is difficult to gauge how much impact a college's overall desire to maintain a balanced student body has on the decision to accept or reject any particular applicant. Schools are often loath to discuss the specifics of their selection process, and they're especially sensitive when it comes to issues of preferential treatment for one group of students at the expense of another. While the Supreme Court in 2003 did weigh in on the issue of affirmative action for minority students—endorsing in a 5-to-4 decision the use of race as one of many elements in admissions—it has not directly addressed gender targeting in admissions.

The law in this area is decidedly opaque and sometimes seemingly contradictory. There have been several rulings that largely have focused on race, from which admissions officers and education experts intuit what the law on the use of gender might be. In 2001, a federal appeals court barred the University of Georgia from using gender and race considerations to increase the percentage of black men in its undergraduate freshman class. The courts found that the plaintiffs, three white female students who had been denied admission, had been discriminated against under the Title VI and Title IX statutes requiring race and gender equity. In addition, ballot initiatives underway in several states—and one just passed in Michigan—prevent gender and race from being used in the admissions process. While aimed at ending affirmative action, the language on gender could affect colleges' ability to engineer a gender balance in their entering classes. "There's no easy answer as to what's legal and what isn't legal," says Marcia Greenberger, copresident of the National Women's Law Center. Even so, the continuing practice of admissions departments is worrisome, says Emily Martin, deputy director of the AClU Women's Rights Project. "It raises questions about punishing girls for their success."

Engineering. Often lost in the debate is the fact that the gender ratio in higher education has undergone major shifts before. Between 1900 and 1930, for example, men and women were equally represented in higher education, largely because of teaching programs that were dominated by women. That parity ended abruptly after World War II, when the GI Bill disproportionately benefited males returning from military service. Men continued to be overrepresented until the early 1980s.

What does all of this mean for applicants? For girls, making the cut might come down to something as simple as the expected field of study. As an admissions officer from a small midwestern liberal arts college puts it: "God help the female English majors who apply to this school." In fact, women hoping to study engineering will find themselves at an advantage at schools like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which over the past decade has admitted women at a rate that is 17 percentage points higher than for men.

Some colleges, like Lake Erie College in Ohio and Husson College in Maine, are making extra efforts to attract male applicants by creating football teams.

Others are emphasizing hands-on learning on college tours, tweaking their advertising brochures, and reaching out to all-male high schools. Common recruiting practices like writing personalized notes or having alumni call interested students are not as effective at landing students with a Y chromosome, schools have found.

Male applicants are often in an advantaged position—so much so that college counselors have begun advising some boys to "emphasize their maleness," says Steve Goodman, a longtime independent college counselor. He encourages male students to submit pictures or trumpet their sports activities. "Anything to catch an admissions officer's eye."

In the end, targeting applications to schools with historically better admit rates for either gender is a Heisenbergian exercise, where the previous year's data will influence the next year's applicant pool in unknown ways. "Students have very little control over admission in general, and their gender is something that they have no control over," says Connecticut-based independent counselor Janet Rosier. "Worrying about this aspect of an already secretive process will only cause kids more stress." Sitting in the admissions office at the University of Richmond, Marilyn Hesser agrees.

Students, she says, need to follow their hearts in finding the best place for them to live and study. Chasing numbers can be problematic. "We could do more to get applications from men," she says, "but that would also result in more applications from women."