

On Leadership

A gender-equality club, run by men

By Jena McGregor

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Last year, students at Wharton, the University of Pennsylvania's graduate business school, started a campus club focused on gender equality. They called it the 22s, after the percentage [gap](#) that persists between men's and women's pay. Since its founding last year, the club has hosted discussions about discrimination, screened a film about gender issues and conducted surveys that examine attitudes about equality.

And its founders and membership base are made up entirely of men.

"One of the key ideas behind the group was we wanted to dispel the notion that gender equality is a women's issue," said Simran Singh, who graduated from Wharton this year and now works as a senior product manager for VMware. "We wanted to show that it's a universal issue."

The new club at Wharton is just one of a number of ways that men who attend top-flight business schools are getting more involved in the support of gender equality. The efforts reflect the growing import of the topic among the next generation of business leaders and the reality that most of those climbing the top rungs of the corporate ladder are still men. Only about [38 percent](#) of MBA students in North America are women.

Business schools have been increasingly trying to address such gender discrepancies by boosting their numbers and rethinking the tone of their programs. Just last week, the heads of 40 business schools [sat down](#) at the White House to discuss gender-equality issues in the workplace. Other [efforts](#) include steps such as recruiting more female faculty members, offering assertiveness coaching for female students and adding more case studies featuring women to the curriculum.

Yet what's interesting is that it seems to be the schools' male-dominated student body, as much as the academic administrators, that is pushing for the change.

In 2013, Duke University's Fuqua School of Business launched its Male Ambassador Program as part of its women's association. That same year, Harvard Business School's Women's Students Association began a similarly named "[Manbassadors](#)" program, spurred by male students' interest in getting involved.

At Stanford's Graduate School of Business, a group called [WIMmen](#) was formed a year ago as an arm of the school's Women in Management club. Its founder, student Jeff Barnes, said: "There was a lot of interest in this topic but not necessarily a structured avenue for men and women to have conversations about gender issues. We'll make a lot more progress on this if we have both genders sharing their perspectives in the room."

The clubs and programs have begun amid a national conversation about gender in the workplace that has been spotlighting the role men that can play to aid women's careers. Sheryl Sandberg, the author of "[Lean](#)

"In" and Facebook's chief operating officer, has written frequently about the importance [men have](#) — both at work and at home — in helping women get ahead. Actress Emma Watson also gave a powerful [speech](#) that went viral last year about why men should get involved in women's rights, launching the HeforShe campaign.

Meanwhile, a growing number of companies are getting men involved in their corporate women's initiatives or granting them longer [paternity leave](#) to share the work at home. That's essential for promoting real change, says Susan Adams, a professor at Bentley University who studies gender equality. "Most organizations were built by men, and are still by and large run by men," she said. "They're going to change quicker when men are part of this movement."

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Figuring out the best way for men to help tackle, or even talk about, gender equality issues has proved somewhat delicate, however. Harvard Business School's efforts, for example, were scrutinized in a front page [story](#) in the New York Times that caused some [controversy](#), even while showing how much the school was trying to effect change.

At Wharton, the 22s began after male students encouraged the school's women's group to host a roundtable discussion about ways that men could get more involved. About 20 men showed up, and after a couple hours of discussion, they decided to form their own club — one that would co-sponsor events with the women's club but also host some of their own to let men speak openly.

"It was really important to create these spaces where guys could feel like they weren't being judged or criticized," said Rena Fried-Chung, who was co-president of the Wharton Women in Business club last year. "It can be really hard to talk about these issues without feeling like they're saying something wrong."

Stewart Friedman, a professor at Wharton who studies work-life issues, moderated a discussion after The 22s hosted a screening of "[The Mask You Live In](#)," a film about masculinity in American culture. He was impressed to see that more people showed up than there were seats.

Friedman's own academic [research](#) has shown that a generational shift is occurring among today's students. "Men are very different now in terms of what they anticipate and what they want," he said in an interview with The Washington Post in June. "Men and women are much more alike now in what they think it takes for a dual career to work."

Several of the men leading these campus clubs noted that part of their interest in getting involved was because they had working moms. "In part it's an abstract sense of what I think is right, but also personal experience of seeing the impact our current system has," said Laszlo Syrop, the current president of The 22s, who attributes his involvement in gender-equality efforts to witnessing what his mother and other women in his life have faced.

That cause and effect isn't unique to Syrop. Recently released [research](#) from the Harvard Business School [Gender Initiative](#) shows that men with working mothers spend nearly twice as many hours helping with

household duties than men who grew up with stay-at-home moms. "Maybe they have a heightened consciousness of gender issues because their mothers were not traditional," said Robin Ely, a dean at Harvard Business School who leads the Gender Initiative.

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Meanwhile, Barnes, who started the men's group at Stanford, has had an particularly up-close view of the challenges that female leaders face. His mother is Brenda Barnes, a former president and chief executive of PepsiCo North America, who [famously stepped down](#) from her job to spend more time with her family when Jeff was 11, becoming a [poster woman](#) for the debate over whether women could really have it all. ([Brenda Barnes](#) later returned to the corporate suite as chief executive of Sara Lee, before resigning in 2010 after suffering a [stroke](#).)

"I've joked that I grew up in a living laboratory for gender issues," he said. "My family has been cast into a very public spotlight for this issue."

And yet to Barnes as he was growing up, "she was just an executive, it was all very natural," he said of his high-powered mother. "I don't think I really appreciated the struggles women face in the workplace until I got into it myself."

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[Jena McGregor](#)

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