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By Pamela Shen

Cornell University psychology professor Peggy Drexler discussed something that Lance Armstrong, Colin Powell, Bill Clinton, Jamie Foxx, and Drew Carey all have in common -- being raised without fathers -- at a Saybrook College Master's Tea Wednesday.

Speaking to a mostly-female crowd of 30 students and faculty, the author of "Raising Boys Without Men" discussed misconceptions Americans have about the effect of changing family structures on children, and boys in particular. In her new book Drexler studied boys being raised by two mothers, single mothers by choice, single mothers resulting from divorce or death, and intact families.

Drexler said her findings showed that there were no significant differences in the children's development, Drexler said.

"These boys that I call 'head and heart boys' could play in the dirt and help their mom cook," Drexler said. "They were not afraid to take home economics classes. They loved sports, had lots of sports heroes, but also loved to garden."

Drexler said she was especially interested in studying boys who lacked a male figure in their lives to see if they fulfilled effeminate stereotypes.

"I picked boys because boys are more valued to our society," Drexler said. "There is a more strong feeling that if mom is left alone with boy, she is going to make him a sissy boy, tie him to her apron strings."

But Drexler's research showed that the boys raised without a father did not show exclusively masculine or feminine qualities, she said. These "alternative families" developed strategies to provide their children with additional adult role models and ensure open communication about feelings and problems, she said.

"They brought people who would be ongoing, stable part of their lives that their sons could interact with," Drexler said. "These 'head and heart boys' found ways to talk about issues ... even the fantasies about having a father. They were really interpersonally sophisticated since they had to deal with complex feelings at a young age."

Many parents in "alternative families" -- particularly San Francisco Bay area lesbian parents -- were anxious to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for their children, Drexler said.

"They became parentaholics," she said. "[They were] the first to volunteer for homeroom

parent, to be on the board, to be coaches, and to donate money."

Drexler said her work has been met with some criticism, and after the publication of her book, a number of people sent her angry e-mails. Many of the messages attacked her for "endorsing" non-traditional families instead of working to preserve families with heterosexual parents, she said.

"I am a social scientist, not a politician," Drexler said. "Unless we accept families as they are, the children in these families are basically the targets of low self-esteem and difficulties. That is why I think it is really important see how these families are developing, as I did, report it as I saw it, and accept that we aren't Ozzie and Harriet."

Some students said they were encouraged by Drexler's research, because it offered a factual basis for refuting misconceptions that children living in non-traditional families are disadvantaged.

"People have a very fixed idea about this already, because it goes against the idea of the traditional mother and father postcard American family," Graham Boettcher GRD '06 said. "But to have somebody here who has done the research and gone into and looked at non-traditional households, where women are the primary parental presence, it is interesting because you get the true story, instead of the prejudiced story."

But other students said that in her attempt to dispel prejudices against non-traditional families, Drexler actually made assumptions that play to gender stereotypes.

"I felt like she was perpetuating gender norms," Sari Siegel '06. "She is emphasizing that these boys are playing a lot of sports, and that these boys are supposed to play a lot of sports ... Implicitly, she was saying that these boys were men in that they had the stereotypical male quality of athleticism, but also had stereotypical female interest of gardening infused in their upbringing."