

Male Enrollment in College and What Can Be Done To Improve It

An annotated bibliography

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For colleges to really thrive, all voices need to be heard. A gender gap creates unhealthy institutions (Field, 2011).

What's happened to male enrollment in colleges?

Fall 2020, male undergraduate enrollment fell nearly 7 percent, three times that of women. The greatest decline was among students of color at community colleges. The least decline was in Asian men but this was still eight times steeper in decline than among Asian women (Field, 2021).

Women now make up 57% of enrollment and an even greater share of degrees granted (Field, 2021).

Women's enrollment began to overtake men's in the early 1980s (Kreman, 2021; Wilson, 2007).

In 2018, the female-male gap in enrollment among 18- to 24-year-olds stood at eight percentage points for Black and Hispanic students, and six percentage points for white students. Over all, nearly three million fewer men than women enrolled in college that year (Field, 2021).

Students who are undergraduates now do not remember a time when young men were dominant in the classroom (Sax, 2008).

The decline in male enrollment shows no signs of abating. In Spring 2021, 400,000 fewer males enrolled in college than in the spring of 2020, a drop nearly double that for females (203,000) as provided by data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Field, 2021).

While male enrollment has continued a steep decline over the last forty years, "Men as a whole aren't usually a group that comes to mind as needing a leg up" (Field, 2021).

Girls, on average, do better in primary and secondary school. Boys are less likely to seek help when they struggle (Field, 2021).

The differences between boys and girls emerge as early as elementary school, where boys lag in literacy skills and are overrepresented in special education. Boys are also more likely than girls to be punished for misbehaving (Field, 2021).

Boys are also less likely than girls to seek or accept help for their academic and emotional struggles, having been socialized to be self-reliant. By the time they're in middle school, some boys have disengaged from school entirely. Even if they manage to graduate from high school, these boys lack the skill — or the will — to succeed in college (Field, 2021).

At Elon, for example, 61 percent of the university's 4,800 undergraduates were female in each of the last six years, and in the honors program women outnumber men nearly five to one (Wilson, 2007).

Harvard University saw its first majority-female freshman class in the 2005 academic year. That trend continues (Wilson 2007).

In 1976, 51 percent of the students at Tulsa Community College were male. By 2005 the proportion had fallen to 37 percent. When the college studied the issue, officials were surprised to find that the most underrepresented population was white men from rural areas (Wilson, 2007).

“Girls are beating the pants off boys,” says Tom Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. “We have to get boys more engaged so they persist longer in education, and that just isn’t happening” (Wilson, 2007).

Women dominate in almost every measure of college attendance. Girls are more likely than boys to take college-preparatory courses in high school, more likely to enroll in college immediately after highschool graduation, and more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree (Field, 2011).

College women earn better grades, hold more leadership posts, spend more time studying, and earn more honors and awards. They report being more involved than young men in student clubs and volunteer work (ACE, 2006).

And what are young men doing? Studies show they spend more time than their female counterparts exercising, watching television, playing video games, and partying. Young men are 10 percentage points more likely than young women to report that they sometimes oversleep and miss a class (ACE, 2006).

The Gender Equity in Higher Education project’s scholars were assembled in 2005 by Judith Kleinfeld, a psychology professor at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks who studies gender. She says the gender gap affects even young men from middle- and upper-income families, who may go to college but are not necessarily engaged. “They are going with the flow and being dragged along,” says Ms. Kleinfeld (ACE, 2006).

The report, “Gender Equity in Higher Education: 2006,” found that the gender gap was greatest among low-income students of all races, and disappears among students whose families are at the top of the economic ladder (ACE, 2006).

There’s a pipeline problem,” he said. “Boys aren’t doing as well during their K-12 years as the girls are, and they don’t graduate from high school. Sometimes they don’t have the requisite skills to go on to college, especially in reading and writing.” Meanwhile, the options available to men after high school can equal stiff competition for colleges. For some men, joining the military or the work force wins out over earning a degree. “There is lots of work in the trades that is still dominated by men that doesn’t require college,” (Williams June, 2019).

Why are men “falling behind?”

The realities of human development and biology.

- Development plays a part. Boys do not mature as rapidly as girls and girls tend to have better social and behavioral skills from kindergarten onward. (Barron, 2016).
- As detailed in Hannah Rosin’s 2021 article, *The End of Men of the End of Men*, male students struggle more than their female counterparts in multiple ways. According to Rosin, female college students “see a new social context and adapt to new circumstances.” Male students,

on the other hand, “follow the old mores,” and are less adaptable, which in turn triggers distress.

- Young men make up just a third of college counseling service clients (Reetz, Krylowicz, and Mistler, 2014). In the meantime, a generation of “lost boys” is dropping out of college and moving back in with their parents. In fact, young men are now nearly twice as likely as young women to live with their parents with 59% of men ages 18 to 24 living at home (Barron, 2016).
- Male students are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning disabilities (Marder, Levine, and Wagner, 2003).
- At college, many learning-disabled students do not seek out the services available to them. They fail to identify accommodations such as academic support and counseling services that would help them succeed. Feelings of frustration and painful academic struggles can build and lead to the desire to escape.

How can colleges attract more men (based on successes of other colleges and universities)?

What colleges should focus on, says one president, is what they’re doing to keep men after they arrive on campus (Williams June, 2019).

As we look at freshman-to-sophomore retention, it’s lower for males,” he said. “It’s not just a recruiting issue (Williams June, 2019).

Women tend to study abroad, volunteer in the community, and spend longer hours preparing for class, some experts have noted. Men spend more time playing video games, relaxing, and watching television. But men have more substantive engagements with their professors, are more likely to do undergraduate research, and tend to major in fields that steer them into better-paying jobs. And although women do many of the things that researchers have identified as positive influences on a college experience, they also report higher levels of stress and lower levels of confidence than men (Sander, 2012).

Three simple approaches that work best: Get men together in small groups to talk and hang out. Employ “pied pipers”—other young men whom male students are likely to look up to—to make those connections. And if figuring out what men need is still a mystery, just ask them (Kellom, 2010).

But the fact that men spend more time on leisure is “not necessarily a bad thing.” Women appear to be harsher — or perhaps just more realistic — critics of themselves than men are. The diligence and motivation that many female students display, though, often belies a complicated vision of their own skills and abilities. Women appear to be harsher—or perhaps just more realistic (Sax, 2008).

Some colleges are creating mentoring and advising programs for men, particularly those who are Black and Hispanic (Field, 2021).

Dickinson College tells stories of successful male students on its website and in its alumni magazine (Wilson, 2007).

Colleges also need to make it less embarrassing for men to seek help for their academic struggles, who suggests embedding tutors in classes, so students don't have to seek them out (Field, 2021).

It is not unusual for the men in Elon's honors program to find themselves in a distinct minority in classes, as well. At times that can make it uncomfortable for them to speak out. Jonathan Mahlandt, a freshman, says his honors course last semester, "The Global Experience," had only four men and 12 women. "We couldn't really say certain comments about girls and women because we were afraid we'd be shot down," he says. "But there were a lot of jokes about men and guys" (Wilson, 2007).

But programs and positions offered by colleges that cater to men remain relatively rare and those that do exist tend to be untested and underfunded (Field, 2021).

James Shelley, who founded one of the nation's first men's resource centers, at Lakeland Community College, in 1996 — "the prehistoric period," he calls it — said many college leaders still view men as a privileged class. "One thing I often hear is that men still have most of the power, they still make more on the dollar than women, so why create a special program for them?" he said. "It's not an easy sell" (Field, 2021).

Shelley sees this structural "anti-maleness" embedded in school-discipline policies that disproportionately net boys, and in sexual-assault prevention programs that sometimes treat incoming students as threats. "I had one young man tell me 'I was welcomed to college by being told that I'm a potential rapist,'" he said (Field, 2021).

Leaders must start with convincing men that college is, indeed, "worth it" (Field, 2021).

The lack of clear relevance [of higher education] — that in a faltering job market, the cost and the sacrifice will pay off with meaningful career outcomes — appears to be deflating aspiring adult learners' confidence that postsecondary education or at least certain pathways, hold the answer to their hardships. The need for relevance also shapes the nature of the increased interest in education and training. Immediate financial pressure and uncertainty about the shape of an economic recovery has led to a preference for a short-term nondegree (25%) or skills-training (37%) programs, outpacing bachelor's degree programs (16%) by a significant margin (Clayton, 2020).

Moreover, both economists and sociologists have documented the association between gender and career outcomes. Men are more likely than women to participate in the labor force, and men average more hours of paid labor per week and more weeks per year. Women and men tend to hold different occupations and to work in different industries, firms and jobs. Furthermore, men out earn women, hold more complex jobs and are more likely to supervise workers of the other sex and to dominate the top positions in their organization (Reskin and Bielby, 2005).

"Male students, more than female students, tend to be more concerned about borrowing money and how they're going to pay it back after college," Hawkins said. "And male students will tend to question the value of a college education" (Williams June, 2019).

Recommendations for fraternities based on the literature:

Evidence suggests these programs and services benefit men in higher education:

- Academic and personal mentoring and advising
- Academic engagement programs like research and internships
- Clear pathways to support for learning differences
- Skills training
- Career readiness training
- Financing education and related opportunities
- Demonstrate the financial and personal value of fraternity
- Vocal support for men in public settings when they are demeaned for their sex/gender
- Public relations support for men via regularly telling stories of individual and collective male success to both highlight and encourage continued success

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