Gender Equity in Higher Education

Are Male Students at a Disadvantage?

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Introduction

A glance at the shelves of bookstores and newsstands suggests that the media—and perhaps the general public as well—believe that males are falling behind their female peers in terms of educational attainment. The *New York Times Magazine* recently devoted an entire issue to chronicling the difficulties experienced by adolescent boys. The cover story of the May 2000 edition of *Atlantic Monthly,* entitled "The War Against Boys," argued that researchers have wrongly focused attention on the problems of young girls.[1] Several high-profile books about the problems of young men and how parents might help their sons avoid these troubles also have recently hit the market.[2]

This view is not limited to the popular press and self-help literature. For the past five years, respected higher education policy analyst Tom Mortenson has posed the question, "Where are the guys?" in his newsletter *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*[3] and various other publications.[4] He has identified the growing disparity between the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to men and women as a bellwether of a larger societal problem—the declining achievement and social disengagement of boys and men. He reaches the following conclusion:

> "[M]ales are being displaced by females who are changing, growing educationally, and filling the kinds of new jobs and other social roles that our society needs and is creating … [S]ome portion of the gains made by women have come at the expense of men."[5]

Mortenson further suggests that educators and the general public are unaware of this issue and that those who are aware of it generally are not sympathetic to the problems of boys and men.

Mortenson is not alone in his assessment of the educational achievement of boys and men. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the statistical arm of the U.S. Department of Education, recently released a report that traces the educational achievement of males and females from pre-primary through graduate edu-

cation.[6] The report concludes that, while women continue to lag behind men in math and science, they are more likely than their male peers to hold high educational aspirations, to enroll in college, and to attain a college degree.

Both the Mortenson and NCES analyses are based on aggregate data on the educational achievement of all men and women, regardless of age, race/ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (SES). This report takes a closer read of these data, disaggregating key indicators on educational achievement by demographic factors such as age and race/ethnicity. The results suggest that the state of gender equity varies tremendously by age, race/ethnicity, and SES. There is not a generalized educational crisis among men, but there are pockets of real problems. In particular, African-American, Hispanic, and low-income males lag behind their female peers in terms of educational attainment and are far outpaced by white, Asian-American, and middle-class men and women.

These conditions are not new. Black, Hispanic, and low-income students have lagged behind their peers for years. In addition, the growing gender gap within these groups has been well-documented by the American Council on Education's *Annual Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education,* among other publications. Why are we paying attention to the academic success of males now? The answer may be that the public has come to believe that academic underachievement is shifting from a problem that only afflicts poor and nonwhite males to a more widespread issue that also affects white, middle-class males. The data presented in this report refute this thesis. There is little evidence to suggest that white, middle-class males are falling behind their female peers.

Gender Gaps in the Educational Pipeline

There are many indicators one could choose to measure educational attainment. Several of the most common data series illustrate where students are making progress along the educational pipeline and where there are gaps in achievement. These indicators are:

- High school graduation.
- Preparation for college.
- Immediate transition to college.
- College enrollment.
- Persistence and degree attainment.
- Degrees conferred.*

This report examines these indicators to determine where males are underperforming and, more importantly, which groups of males are keeping pace with their female peers and which are falling behind.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

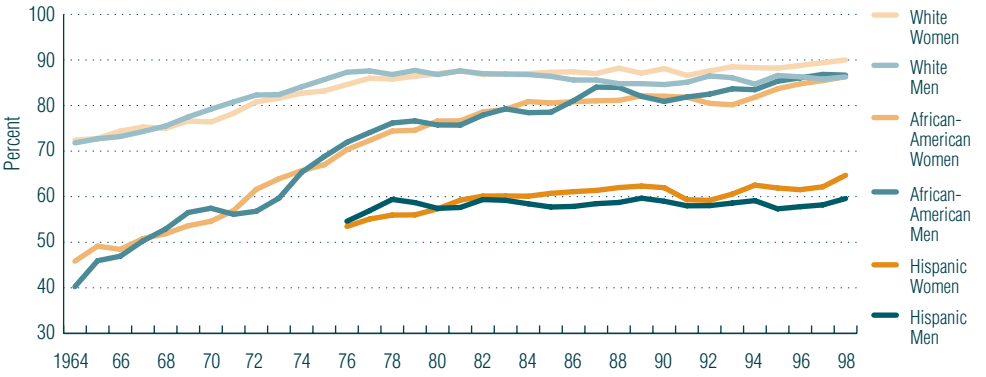
Since the mid-1960s, the percentage of Americans aged 25 to 29 with a high school diploma has been virtually equal for men and women. The real differences are among the major racial and ethnic groups (see Figure 1). At the high school level, the big story for African Americans is not a gender gap, but rather the progress both sexes have made in catching up to whites. Among Hispanics, women aged 25 to 29 now are more likely than men to hold a high school diploma, but the most significant gap is between Hispanics of both genders and the rest of the population. While close to 90 percent of white and African-American men aged 25 to 29 have a high

* Unfortunately, there is no single database that tracks changes over time in educational participation and attainment by gender, race/ethnicity, and income. This paper draws on numerous sources of data, including surveys by the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Education. Because multiple data sets are used, the figures in this paper will not match exactly. However, the basic trends suggested by these various data sets are complementary. A complete list of data sources is included at the end of this paper.

school diploma, only 60 percent of Hispanic men have reached this minimal level of educational attainment. Particularly troubling is the fact that, since these data have been collected for Hispanics, neither men nor women have shown much progress. In recent years, there seems to be a small upturn in the trend line for Hispanic women, but it is too soon to tell whether this progress will be sustained.

FIGURE 1.

Percentage of Americans Aged 25 to 29 with a High School Diploma, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender: 1964 to 1998



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March Current Population Surveys: 1964 to 1998.
Note: To reduce year-to-year variability due to sampling error, a three-year running average is used for Hispanics and African Americans.

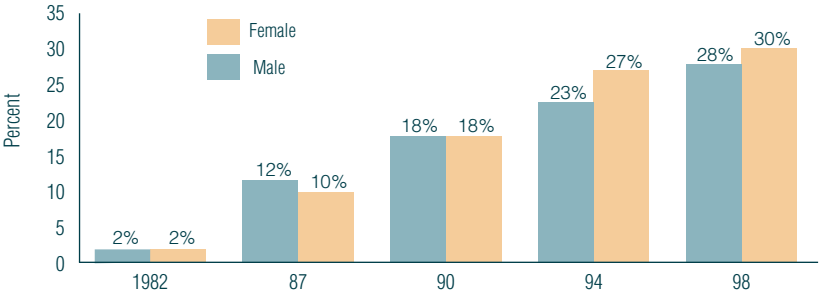
PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE

Research has shown that one of the best predictors of both enrollment and success in college is the rigor of the high school curriculum.[7] One standard measure of curricular rigor is the "New Basics" curriculum. Since 1982, the U.S. Department of Education has collected statistics on the percentage of students completing this curriculum, which consists of four years of English, three years of social science, math, and science, two years of a foreign language, and a semester of computer science. The percentage of high school graduates completing this sequence of courses has grown steadily, from 2 percent in 1982 to 29 percent in 1998. Figure 2 shows that over this period, there have not been significant differences in the percentage of young men and women completing the New Basics curriculum.

The data collection on 1992 high school graduates allows for disaggregation by race/ethnicity and family income, as well as gender. Table 1 shows that young African-American women from families with annual incomes of less than $25,000

FIGURE 2.

Percentage of High School Seniors Completing the "New Basics" College Preparatory Curriculum, by Gender: 1982 to 1998



Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics: 1999.*

are significantly more likely to have completed the New Basics curriculum than their male peers. Among middle- and upper-income graduates, young Asian-American and African-American men are more likely to have completed the New Basics curriculum than their female peers. Among white students at each income level, there is little difference between the sexes. These data suggest that only low-income, young African-American males are more likely than their female peers to leave high school unprepared to enter college.

TABLE 1.

Percentage of 1992 High School Graduates Completing the "New Basics" High School Curriculum, by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Family Income

	Less than $25,000			$25,000 to $74,999			$75,000 or More		
	Men	Women	Difference	Men	Women	Difference	Men	Women	Difference
Asian American	24	21	-3	29	23	-6	32	24	-8
Hispanic	12	13	1	22	19	-3	N/A	N/A	N/A
African American	7	17	10	24	8	-6	N/A	N/A	N/A
White	11	14	3	18	20	2	29	29	0
Total	**10**	**15**	**5**	**19**	**20**	**1**	**29**	**29**	**0**

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Education Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up: 1988/1992.
N/A: Sample size too small to generate a reliable estimate.

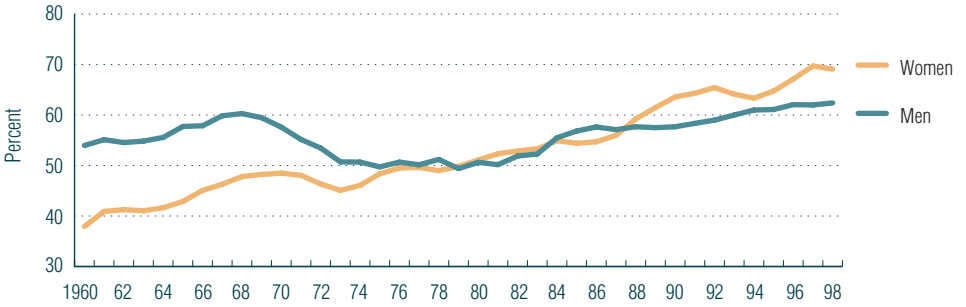
IMMEDIATE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

One simple indicator of access to higher education is the rate at which high school graduates transition immediately to college. Certainly, many adults enter higher education later in life, but research has consistently shown that students who enroll in college immediately after high school have a higher rate of retention and graduation than those who delay enrollment.

Figure 3 tracks the rate at which high school graduates in a given year enroll in college by October of that year. This indicator has shown considerable variability by gender. At the end of the Vietnam War, when obtaining a draft deferment for college enrollment ceased to be a concern, the immediate enrollment rate of male high school graduates dropped significantly. It remained flat through the 1970s, but has shown improvement since 1980. The story for women over this period has been one of relatively steady increases in immediate college participation, with more rapid increases since the mid-1980s. It is important to note that, while women now are significantly more likely to enroll immediately in postsecondary education than men, the rate went up for both groups during the 1990s.

FIGURE 3.

Immediate College Enrollment Rates of High School Graduates, by Gender: 1960 to 1998



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March Current Population Surveys: 1960 to 1998.
Note: To reduce year-to-year variability due to sampling error, a three-year running average is used.

Annual data on the immediate transition from high school to college are not collected by race and SES, but this information is available from a U.S. Department of Education study of the high school class of 1992. These results suggest that the gender gap is substantial at all socioeconomic levels, but that it decreases as SES rises (see Table 2). The most striking aspect of these data is not the gap between men and women, or even among the major racial/ethnic groups, but rather the large

difference between low and high SES students. In particular, low-SES white and African-American students are half as likely to transition immediately to college as their upper-SES peers. The "class gap" is somewhat smaller for Hispanic high school graduates, but Hispanic students are far less likely to finish high school than either whites or African Americans. Many students who don't enroll in college immediately after high school eventually will enter higher education; however, if current patterns continue, the vast majority of late enrollees will be women.

TABLE 2.

Percentage of 1992 High School Graduates Immediately Entering Postsecondary Education, by Socioeconomic Status

	Low Socioeconomic Status			High Socioeconomic Status		
	Men	Women	Difference	Men	Women	Difference
White	25	35	9	77	83	6
African American	32	51	19	71	80	9
Hispanic	45	51	6	74	77	3
Asian American	59	75	16	84	88	4
All Students	**33**	**44**	**11**	**77**	**83**	**6**

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Education Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up: 1988/1992.

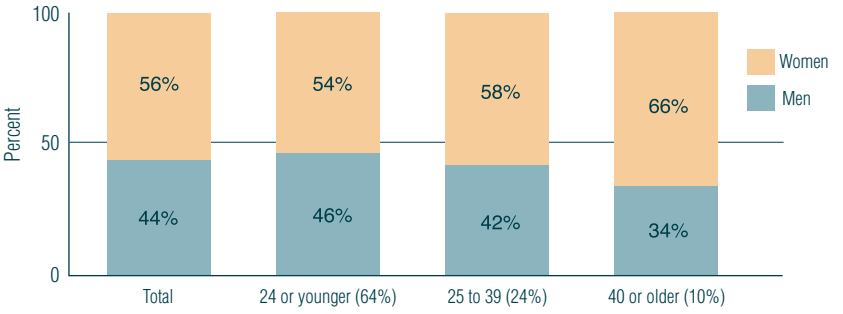
COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

The number of women participating annually in higher education at all levels now equals almost 8 million, while only 6.3 million men enroll. The number of male college students has hovered around 6 million since 1975, while the number of females has grown substantially, from 5 million in 1975 to 8 million in 1997, the last year for which these data are available. These statistics seem to suggest a large and pervasive gender gap, but they mask tremendous differences by academic level, age, race/ethnicity, and income.

Women do not predominate at all levels of higher education; men are still the majority in doctoral and professional programs. Women are the majority in master's degree programs, which account for 75 percent of graduate and professional enrollment. This disparity exists in large part because women hold a substantial majority in master's degree programs in the fields of education and health, which account for one-third of master's degrees conferred. Men continue to hold the majority in the other two large master's degree fields—business and engineering.

FIGURE 4.

Distribution of Undergraduates, by Age and Gender: 1997



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System: 1997 Fall Enrollment Survey.

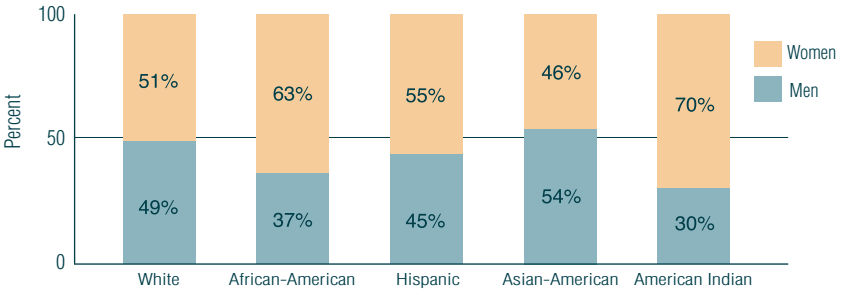
At the undergraduate level, women hold the majority in all age groups, but their majority is slimmer among those aged 24 or younger than among older students (see Figure 4). This finding makes sense; until the late 1970s, there was not a strong expectation that women would attend college or participate in the professional world. Since then, most women have chosen to enter, or been forced by circumstances into, a workforce in which some type of postsecondary education is increasingly necessary. As a result, women hold a large majority among students over the age of 24.

It is not clear that this pattern will hold in the future. Because young women today are more likely to enter and complete college immediately after high school, a smaller share of these women may need to return to college later in life. At the same time, the current emphasis on lifelong learning and constant retraining in the job market may mean that both men and women will continue to return to higher education as they progress through their careers. It will be important to monitor enrollment—in both traditional degree programs as well as adult and continuing education—to determine whether a gender gap emerges among "lifelong learners."

Older African-American and Hispanic females hold particularly large majorities over their male counterparts. These women, who did not enter higher education when they were 18 or who previously dropped out of college, are enrolling for a second chance. Many of them attend community colleges where they major in fields that are likely to improve their earnings potential, such as allied health. Little research has been done on why older African-American and Hispanic men—who also are likely to have been unable and/or unprepared to attend college at age 18—do not

FIGURE 5.

Distribution of Undergraduates Aged 24 or Younger, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity: 1995–96



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 1995–96.

enroll in postsecondary education. One possible explanation is that there are more decent-paying jobs for those without a college degree in traditionally male "blue collar" construction and manufacturing fields than there are in female-dominated "pink collar" service fields such as retail sales and food service. Because there are many more good jobs available in the new knowledge-based economy for both men and women with at least some postsecondary education, more research is necessary to determine why these older men stay away from college and how to bring them into postsecondary education.

While the problems of older students are very real, most public attention continues to focus on the gender disparity among traditional-age students. Given differences in enrollment patterns by age, it is important to examine the population of traditional-age college students in isolation. Using yet another federal survey to parse that group by race/ethnicity, one finds startling differences in enrollment. Figure 5 reveals that there is virtually no difference in the number of white, traditional-age men and women enrolled as undergraduates. However, the gender gaps among African Americans, American Indians, and to a lesser degree, Hispanics, are huge. These differences create the gender gap among all traditional-age students. Filtering again for enrollment at only four-year institutions, one finds that the same patterns persist. While there is a small female majority among white students at four-year institutions, it is dwarfed by the female majorities among African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

Using the same survey, one can examine enrollment by race, gender, and income for undergraduates aged 24 or younger (see Table 3). These data suggest that the gender gap is substantial for most groups of low-income students, but as income

increases, the gender gap disappears or reverses itself to favor males. The exception is African Americans. For these students, there is a substantial gender gap even among upper-income students. These data make the most compelling argument yet for the thesis that only some groups of men are at a disadvantage in the educational pipeline.

TABLE 3.

Distribution of Undergraduate Enrollment Among Students Aged 24 or Younger, by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Income: 1995–96

	Low Income (less than $30,000)		Middle Income ($30,000 to $69,999)		Upper Income ($70,000 or more)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
White	46	54	50	50	52	48
African American	32	68	48	52	41	59
Hispanic	43	57	46	54	50	50
Asian American	53	47	57	43	52	48
American Indian	23	77	53	47	N/A	N/A
All Students	**44**	**56**	**50**	**50**	**51**	**49**

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 1995–96.
N/A: The sample size is too small to generate a reliable estimate.

TABLE 4.

Percentage of Students Who Began Postsecondary Education in 1989–90 Who Had Attained a Degree or Were Still Enrolled in Spring 1994

	Attained BA	Still Enrolled	Total
White Men	33	16	49
White Women	38	12	50
African-American Men	16	15	31
African-American Women	24	11	35
Hispanic Men	19	12	31
Hispanic Women	29	14	43
All Men	**31**	**16**	**47**
All Women	**36**	**12**	**48**

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Beginning Postsecondary Students Study: 1989/1994.
Note: Includes only students who expressed the goal in 1989–90 of attaining a bachelor's degree. The category of students who are still enrolled includes only those enrolled at four-year institutions.

PERSISTENCE AND DEGREE ATTAINMENT

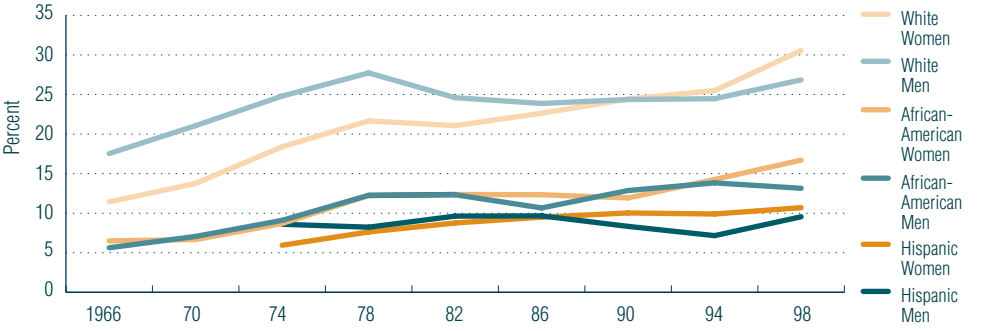
The most recent federal survey on persistence reveals that women who enter postsecondary education with the goal of attaining a bachelor's degree are more likely than men with similar ambitions to have earned a BA within five years. However, men are more likely than women to still be enrolled and working toward a BA at that point. As illustrated in Table 4, when the percentage of students with a degree and the percentage still enrolled at a four-year institution are combined, there is no significant difference between all men and all women.

Consistent with the data already reviewed on high school graduation and college enrollment, differences in persistence among racial/ethnic groups are far more pronounced than differences by gender. About one-third of African Americans and Hispanics who entered postsecondary education in 1989–90 with the goal of earning a bachelor's degree had either received a BA or were still enrolled at a four-year institution in 1994, compared to half of whites. There is little or no gender difference in persistence to a BA among whites or African Americans. Among Hispanics, however, women are significantly more likely than men to either have attained a BA or still be working toward one after five years. Unless the college enrollment and persistence rates of African Americans and Hispanics increase dramatically, it is unlikely that the large gap evident in Figure 6 between the educational attainment of whites and minorities will narrow.

Figure 6 depicts the percentage of Americans aged 25 to 29 who have completed at least four years of college, by both race/ethnicity and gender. This figure tells several stories about the educational attainment of Americans over the past 30 years. The

FIGURE 6.

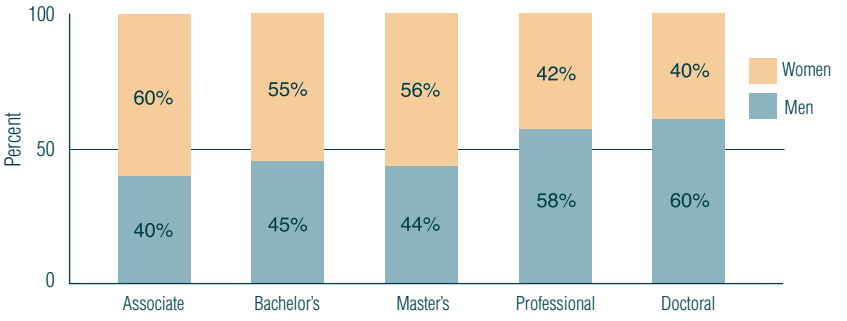
Percentage of Americans Aged 25 to 29 with a Bachelor's Degree, Selected Years: 1966 to 1998



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March Current Population Surveys: 1966 to 1998.

FIGURE 7.

Share of Degrees Conferred to Men and Women: 1995–96



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System: 1996 Completions Survey.

most striking aspect of Figure 6 is that, despite progress made by African-American women, the gap between whites and African Americans is larger today than in the mid-1960s. White women had a significantly lower rate of educational attainment than white men until the mid-1980s, and only surpassed their male peers by an appreciable amount in the late 1990s. In contrast, the shares of African-American men and women who have completed four years of college are similar from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s. At least during the period covered by this data series, African-American females were never at a severe educational disadvantage compared to their male peers.

Both white and African-American men significantly increased their participation in higher education during the Vietnam War, at least in part because men who enrolled in college could obtain a draft deferment. After the Vietnam era, the percentage of white men with four years or more of college declined and remained flat until the mid-1990s, when it began to rise once again. After Vietnam, the percentage of African-American men with four years of college did not decline, but it has not shown any sustained growth since that period either, so the gap between African-American and white males has not closed appreciably.

The data series for Hispanics, which did not begin until 1973, shows steady gains for women until the mid-1980s and little change since then. There has been little sustained progress among Hispanic men. As a result, the significant gender gap in college completion between young Hispanic men and women which existed in the 1970s has virtually disappeared. Unfortunately, the gap between the percentage of young Hispanics and whites who have completed four years of college has only grown wider over this period.

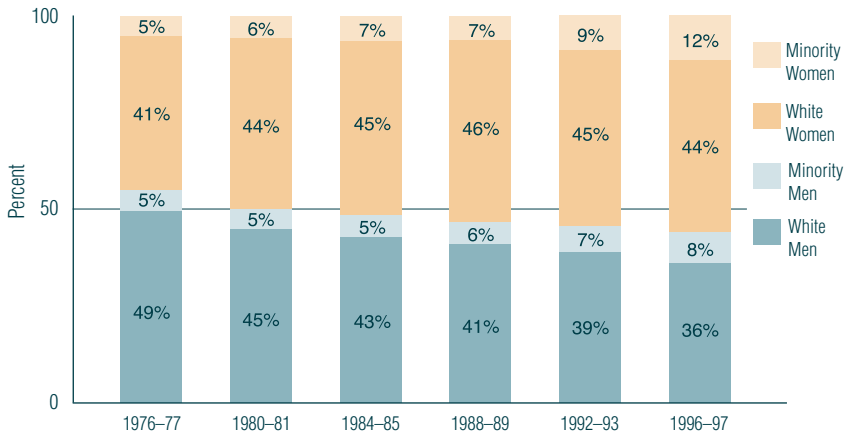
DEGREES CONFERRED

These indicators of persistence and degree attainment suggest that the gender gap problem is neither as large nor as generalized as previous analyses might suggest and document a large and persistent gap in educational attainment between whites and minorities. However, the disparity in degrees conferred to men and women is significant. Women earn the majority of associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees (see Figure 7).

One of the best pieces of evidence supporting the thesis that men are in trouble is the widening disparity in the share of bachelor's degrees awarded to men and women each year. Men received only 44 percent of BAs conferred in 1996–97, the last year for which these data are available. The male share of bachelor's degrees within each major racial/ethnic group ranged from 47 percent among Asian Americans to 36 percent among African Americans. Figure 8 tracks the share of BAs awarded to white and minority men and women between 1976–77 and 1996–97. In 1976–77, men received the majority of bachelor's degrees. Since then, the proportion of BAs awarded to minority men has grown slightly, but the share of bachelor's degrees awarded to white men has declined dramatically, from 49 percent in 1976–77 to 36 percent in 1996–97. Meanwhile, the proportion of bachelor's degrees awarded to minority women has more than doubled, from 5 percent to 12 percent. The proportion of BAs earned by white women has changed little since 1980.

FIGURE 8.

Distribution of Bachelor's Degrees Conferred, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity: 1976 to 1996 (Selected Years)

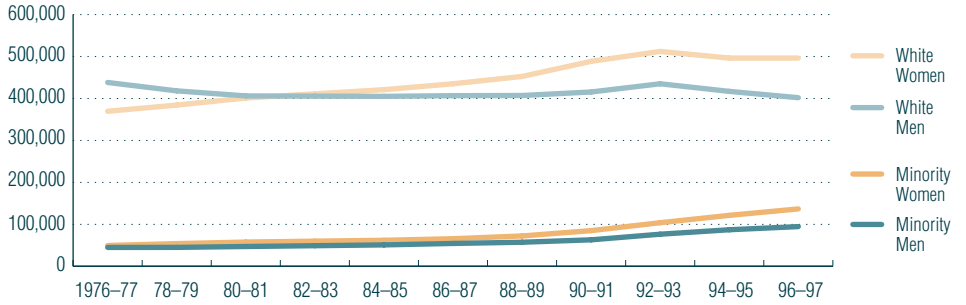


Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics: 1999*.

The smaller share of BAs awarded to white men is the result of three concurrent trends (see Figure 9). First, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to minority men and women has grown steadily since 1988. Second, white women saw a steady increase in the number of BAs they earned between 1976 and 1992. Third, and most important, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to white men was either flat or declining slightly over this period. No growth in the number of BAs awarded to white men, combined with the increased number of degrees awarded to white and minority women and minority men, drove down the share of BAs earned by white males.

FIGURE 9.

Number of Bachelor's Degrees Conferred, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender: 1976 to 1996



Source: U.S. Department of Education: *Digest of Education Statistics: 1999.*
Note: Missing data for some years were interpolated.

It is important to put these trends in context. The declining share of bachelor's degrees awarded to white males is a reflection of larger societal and demographic trends. The number of bachelor's degrees awarded to men of all races peaked in 1974, in part because many men had enrolled in college during the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to avoid the draft. In addition, the late 1970s coincided with the end of the period in which most baby boomers went to college. Because of this demographic shift, analysts predicted a severe drop-off in college enrollment in the 1980s. Enrollment did not decline, however, because the growing number of minorities and older women choosing to enter postsecondary education compensated for the decreased number of traditional-age students in the general population.

There was no decline in the high school graduation or immediate college enrollment rates of white men during the 1980s and 1990s. Rather, there simply were fewer young white men in the population. Meanwhile, the high school graduation rate of minorities, and the immediate college enrollment rate of both minorities and women, improved over this period, bringing more women and minorities to college campuses. In addition, older women flocked to college campuses in the 1980s and 1990s. This story is not one of male failure, or even lack of opportunity, but rather one of increased academic opportunity and success among females and minorities. However, some white men do face real difficulties. The data in Table 2 (see page 7) suggest that low-income white male high school students are less likely to enter college than their African-American and Hispanic peers.

At the associate degree level, women earn far more degrees than men. In 1995–96, women earned 60 percent of associate degrees conferred. This is not a new phenomenon; women have earned the majority of associate degrees since the mid-1970s. In contrast, women only began to earn appreciably more bachelor's degrees than men in the late 1980s. The large female majority at the associate degree level is not surprising; 58 percent of community college students are women. The patterns that were evident at the baccalaureate level also exist among associate degree recipients. The gender gap is shaped by the large number of older women attending community colleges and the disproportionate enrollment and academic achievement of African-American and Hispanic women.

The last degree type of which women earn the majority is the master's degree. However, as noted above, this majority is deceptive; men continue to earn the majority of degrees in fields that tend to have the highest wages. Women earned 55 percent of master's degrees conferred in 1995–96. Seventy-five percent of master's degrees awarded to women are in one of five fields: education, business, health, public administration, and psychology. In each of these fields except business, women earn the majority of degrees. Only 35 percent of MBAs and other master's degrees in business are awarded to women. Among men, the most popular fields are business, education, and engineering, with men holding substantial majorities among degree earners in business and engineering. They also earn almost three-quarters of all master's degrees awarded in computer and information science.

Conclusion

Given the diversity of sources and indicators represented by the data in this paper, the patterns that are apparent at each step in the educational pipeline are remarkably similar. While women do earn the majority of degrees awarded each year, the gender gap is dwarfed by the educational chasms related to race/ethnicity and social class. Therein lies the "crisis." Low-income and minority men have a particularly difficult time excelling academically, but their female counterparts continue to lag behind whites as well. Educators should continue to monitor these indicators to determine whether the gender gap is growing wider or spreading to other groups of students, but it seems premature to declare a widespread problem among all boys and men. The message in these data for educators, political leaders, and the media is to concentrate our time, resources, and attention on the students who are in greatest danger of being left behind in the educational pipeline and to avoid becoming distracted by "crises" that may have little basis in fact.

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