

A Generation of American Men Give Up on College: 'I Just Feel Lost'

robinmini.com/blog/12474



Education

Men are abandoning higher education in such numbers that they now trail female college students by record levels.

At the close of the 2020-21 academic year, women made up 59.5% of college students, an all-time high, and men 40.5%, according to enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit research group. U.S. colleges and universities had 1.5 million fewer students compared with five years ago, and men accounted for 71% of the decline.

This education gap, which holds at both two- and four-year colleges, has been slowly widening for 40 years. The divergence increases at graduation: After six years of college, 65% of women in the U.S. who started a four-year university in 2012 received diplomas by 2018 compared with 59% of men during the same period, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

In the next few years, two women will earn a college degree for every man, if the trend continues, said Douglas Shapiro, executive director of the research center at the National Student Clearinghouse.

No reversal is in sight. Women increased their lead over men in college applications for the 2021-22 school year—3,805,978 to 2,815,810—by nearly a percentage point compared with the previous academic year, according to Common Application, a nonprofit that transmits applications to more than 900 schools. Women make up 49% of the college-age population in the U.S., according to the Census Bureau.

“Men are falling behind remarkably fast,” said Thomas Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, which aims to improve educational opportunities for low-income, first-generation and disabled college students.

American colleges, which are embroiled in debates over racial and gender equality, and working on ways to reduce sexual assault and harassment of women on campus, have yet to reach a consensus on what might slow the retreat of men from higher education. Some schools are quietly trying programs to enroll more men, but there is scant campus support for spending resources to boost male attendance and retention.

The gender enrollment disparity among nonprofit colleges is widest at private four-year schools, where the proportion of women during the 2020-21 school year grew to an average of 61%, a record high, Clearinghouse data show. Some of the schools extend offers to a higher percentage of male applicants, trying to get a closer balance of men and women.

“Is there a thumb on the scale for boys? Absolutely,” said Jennifer Delahunty, a college enrollment consultant who previously led the admissions offices at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Ore. “The question is, is that right or wrong?”

Ms. Delahunty said this kind of tacit affirmative action for boys has become “higher education’s dirty little secret,” practiced but not publicly acknowledged by many private universities where the gender balance has gone off-kilter.

“It’s unfortunate that we’re not giving this issue air and sun so that we can start to address it,” she said.

At Baylor University, where the undergraduate student body is 60% female, the admission rate for men last year was 7 percentage points higher than for women. Every student has to meet Baylor’s admission standards to earn admission, said Jessica King Gereghy, the school’s assistant vice president of enrollment strategy and innovation. Classes, however, are shaped to balance several variables, including gender, she said.

Ms. Gereghy said she found that girls more closely attended to their college applications than boys, for instance making sure transcripts are delivered. Baylor created a “males and moms communication campaign” a few years ago to keep high-school boys on track, she said.

Race and gender can't be considered in admission decisions at California's public universities. The proportion of male undergraduates at UCLA fell to 41% in the fall semester of 2020 from 45% in fall 2013. Over the same period, undergraduate enrollment expanded by nearly 3,000 students. Of those spots, nine out of 10 went to women.

"We do not see male applicants being less competitive than female applicants," UCLA Vice Provost Youlonda Copeland-Morgan said, but fewer men apply.

The college gender gap cuts across race, geography and economic background. For the most part, white men—once the predominant group on American campuses—no longer hold a statistical edge in enrollment rates, said Mr. Mortenson, of the Pell Institute. Enrollment rates for poor and working-class white men are lower than those of young Black, Latino and Asian men from the same economic backgrounds, according to an analysis of census data by the Pell Institute for the Journal.

No college wants to tackle the issue under the glare of gender politics, said Ms. Delahunty, the enrollment consultant. The conventional view on campuses, she said, is that "men make more money, men hold higher positions, why should we give them a little shove from high school to college?"

Yet the stakes are too high to ignore, she said. "If you care about our society, one, and, two, if you care about women, you have to care about the boys, too. If you have equally educated numbers of men and women that just makes a better society, and it makes it better for women."

The pandemic accelerated the trend. Nearly 700,000 fewer students were enrolled in colleges in spring 2021 compared with spring 2019, a Journal analysis found, with 78% fewer men.

The decline in male enrollment during the 2020-21 academic year was highest at two-year community colleges. Family finances are believed to be one cause. Millions of women left jobs to stay home with children when schools closed in the pandemic. Many turned to their sons for help, and some young men quit school to work, said Colleen Coffey, executive director of the College Planning Collaborative at Framingham State University in Massachusetts, a program to keep students in school.

"The guys felt they needed to step in quickly," Ms. Coffey said.

It isn't clear how many will return to school after the pandemic.

No plan Over the course of their working lives, American college graduates earn more than a million dollars beyond those with only a high-school diploma, and a university diploma is required for many jobs as well as most professions, technical work and positions of influence.