



The Male Enrollment Crisis

What's the ratio of men to women in college?

Men make up just over half of the 18- to 24-year-olds in America, but they're vastly outnumbered in the nation's colleges. In the spring of 2021, men represented just 40.5 percent of undergraduate students — an all-time low — as the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated and amplified a trend that's been building for 40 years.

Between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2021, as colleges shifted online and students struggled with health and economic worries, undergraduate enrollment slumped 7.8 percent. The slide was steeper for men — 10.2 percent compared with 6.8 percent for women.

The most striking dips in male student enrollment were at public two-year colleges, where overall enrollments tumbled 14.8 percent. Although the rate of

enrollment decline among men has slowed somewhat, it was still higher for men at 18.6 percent, compared with 13.1 percent for women. Much of the enrollment decline at community colleges was among men attending hands-on training programs like automotive repair and welding that are harder to move online, [a working paper](#) published this month by the National Bureau of Economic Research finds.

At private four-year colleges, the proportion of women rose to a record-high average of 60 percent in 2020-21.

It wasn't just enrollment where gaps between men and women widened. Once they enter college, women are also more likely to stay and graduate. For students enrolling in a four-year-college in 2012, 65 percent of women and 59 percent of men had earned a bachelor's



Ascendium Education Group is excited to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's initiative to prioritize student success. Over the next year, this partnership will produce special virtual events, focused reports and a new online resource center, where colleges can search and find creative solutions and useful content from The Chronicle's extensive archives of best practices.

Our support of this project promises a comprehensive look at new and innovative approaches to helping students achieve success. By collecting voices and perspectives from across higher education, The Chronicle's expert journalists can guide colleges to make actionable changes that will help close achievement gaps and fulfill the promise of socioeconomic mobility for all students.

Ascendium supports initiatives that seek to create large-scale change so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their educational and career goals. We share with The Chronicle a passion and purpose to inform and empower higher education trustees, leaders, administrators and faculty members about the pressing issues facing students today. That includes shining a light on students of color and transfer students, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

We believe in the power of education and training beyond high school to transform the lives of learners from low-income backgrounds. The COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put these learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This makes the solutions raised by this initiative all the more vital.

Thank you for your interest in this initiative. To learn more about Ascendium, please [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Kerwin". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Amy Kerwin

Vice President – Education Philanthropy
Ascendium Education Group



degree within six years, the U.S. Department of Education [reports](#).

The gap shows no signs of narrowing. Applications to the Common Application are one clear indicator. With 914 institutions reporting last year, women filled out 3.8 million applications and men, 2.8 million. If current trends continue, within the next few years, twice as many women could be earning college degrees as men.

Men are still going to college at higher rates than they were 10 years ago, but the fact that they've fallen so far behind women's college-going rates has many concerned.

How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the gap?

Boys are less likely to graduate from high school and also to go on to college. Sociologists have struggled to come up with explanations that go beyond stereotypical expectations of how boys and girls behave in the classroom.

Some experts say the problem begins in elementary school because boys' brains are generally slower to develop and they're more [likely to struggle with self-discipline](#) and have trouble sitting still. As a result, there's a greater chance they'll be [held back and punished](#). Boys tend to be more reluctant to ask for help. All of these factors can make them less enthusiastic about school at an early age.

In middle and high school, boys continue to receive messages about masculinity that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Being openly smart and studying hard are traits many associate more with girls. Athletic accomplishments are often more valued than academic ones, and boys are more likely than girls to spend hours every day on video games.

They're also more likely to question the value of a college degree, in part because they haven't been socialized as consistently to please the teacher and follow the rules. By the time they became teenagers, some people who were already questioning whether college was right for them found validation in former President Donald Trump's bashing of what he called higher education's liberal and elitist bias.

Meanwhile, many were swayed by stories

about opportunities to make money that don't require years of schooling and decades of debt. Maybe a cousin moved to Texas during a fracking boom and landed a job as a rig operator making \$80,000 a year. FOMO — fear of missing out — is a real deterrent to staying in college. Someone who's more impulsive and less connected to the education pipeline is likely to be tempted to give it a try, and to later regret it if the boom goes bust.

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Why have the declines been especially severe among Black men?

Men's college-going rates are declining across all races and socioeconomic groups, but some of the steepest drops have been among Black males. Nowhere is that more pronounced than in public two-year colleges, where the number of Black male students plunged 21.5 percent in the spring of 2021.

For Black teens who are [more likely than those from other demographics](#) to be raised by single mothers, the dearth of male teachers leaves them without relatable role models to encourage a focus on academics. They often get the message from peers that being openly smart or spending too much time on schoolwork is uncool. Black boys are more likely to be disciplined for behavior that might be tolerated in a white student. Those who attend under-resourced schools are less likely to have access to college-preparatory courses and college guidance. If they do make it to college, they're more likely to be diverted to remedial classes that could discourage them or slow them down.

The Covid-19 pandemic coincided with

a series of high-profile police-brutality incidents that shook the confidence of young Black men that American society is just and their future is theirs to shape. They were more likely to live in households with shaky internet access and attend schools that struggled to keep students engaged virtually. As the pandemic dragged on, they were especially likely to feel cast adrift.

Because many jobs with family-sustaining wages require a college degree, men without one face steeper obstacles and have fewer resources to confront the ones that appear.

Should we be worried?

At mixed-gender colleges, classroom discussions and campus life both suffer without the diversity that a more balanced representation offers. But even more important are the economic and emotional impacts on the men who are abandoning college.

When men skip college, the chances of landing a job where they can earn middle-class wages diminish. Men with bachelor's degrees accrue about \$900,000 more in median lifetime earnings than those with only high-school credentials, according to the [Social Security Administration](#). The nation's economy could suffer, too, without enough educated and highly skilled workers.

Because many jobs with family-sustaining wages require a college degree, men without one face steeper obstacles and have fewer resources to confront the ones that appear. Depression, disillusionment, and substance-abuse problems can be tougher to overcome. And the education imbalance could make finding a marriage partner harder.

On the other hand, there are alternatives. Work-force training at community colleges

and trade schools can prepare students relatively quickly for decent-paying jobs in fields like welding and plumbing that are hungry for workers.

Why aren't there more programs to support men?

Higher education has a long track record of providing centers and special supports for marginalized students, whether they're LGBTQ, students of color, or women in STEM.

But with all the attention nationally to white-male privilege, some ask, why dedicate scarce resources to supporting men?

After all, although women are more likely to enroll and graduate from college, they're still [underrepresented](#) in fields with the highest earnings potential, such as engineering or computer science. The fact that they've made huge strides in college enrollment in recent years and now far outnumber men on campuses doesn't mean there's a crisis, some would argue.

Besides, plenty of men opt for blue-collar jobs that pay reasonably well, while many college graduates end up with low-paying jobs and hefty student loans.

Another reason there's been relatively little attention to the growing gender imbalance is that it's not always evident at highly selective colleges that dominate the news. Their large applicant pools allow them to balance their classes by giving men a leg up in admissions.

College programs that focus on men tend to be small efforts with lean budgets that reach relatively few students.

How are some colleges reaching out to male students?

A small but growing number of campuses offer programs to support men, with many focusing on the specific needs of underserved minorities.

The City University of New York's Black Male Initiative is one longstanding and often-replicated program. The initiative, which reaches thousands of students

across the CUNY system, includes more than 30 projects focused on increasing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of underrepresented students — especially men of color.

The [Men's Resource Center](#) at CUNY's Kingsborough Community College falls under the Black Male Initiative umbrella. It's open to all academically eligible students, faculty, and staff members, but its stated purpose is to support men of color.

The program sets students up with successful peer mentors and encourages participants to lead workshops for at-risk students at a local multicultural high school. A student lecture series provides opportunities for participants to raise their confidence and leadership skills.

The University of Oregon has a [Men's Resource Center](#) that appeals to students who want to challenge outdated notions of masculinity and play a more active role in ending oppression.

St. Louis Community College offers a six-week summer program for Black male students to prepare for campus life and get some credits under their belt.

Sometimes, men just need an extra nudge. Baylor University, with a student population that is 59 percent female, created a communication campaign initially described as “males and moms” to keep potential applicants on track. University officials stress that dads can play an important role, too, in making sure application materials are filed on time.

**“The Male Enrollment Crisis” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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