



Gender Gap Stops Growing

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A report being released today says that the gender gap in college enrollments has largely leveled off, with the key exception of Latino enrollments, where men are falling further behind women.

The report by the American Council on Education comes amid much talk nationally about the significance of trends that have left men making up only about 43 percent of college enrollments and new college graduates. Some colleges have gone so far as to talk about [affirmative action for men](#), which in turn has prompted [an investigation by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights](#). And a flurry of articles have suggested problems for the United States economy and society if male educational attainment continues to decline.

The message of the report is largely encouraging, noting that "several indicators suggest that the size of the gender gap in higher education may have stabilized" and that the number of bachelor's degrees being awarded to men is again on the rise. While women's numbers are also increasing, the report says that the male increases are important in showing that "women's success does not come at the expense of men."

The Latino population is the only one where a significant enrollment gender gap appears to be growing, the report says.

Percentage of Undergraduates Who Are Male, by Race and Ethnicity, for Students 24 and Younger

Group	1995-6	1999-2000	2003-4	2007-8
All	48%	46%	45%	46%
White	49%	46%	46%	47%
Black	37%	40%	40%	41%
Latino	45%	45%	43%	42%
Asian	54%	50%	50%	49%
Native American	n/a	45%	44%	49%

With regard to the Latino figures, the report notes that a significant portion of the Latino population is made up of recent immigrants -- a group that tends to have low high school completion rates, making it more challenging for many Latinos (men and women) to become eligible for college. The report also draws attention to the issue of income and the gender gap. Across racial and ethnic groups, greater proportions of upper income students than lower income students are men, among those financially dependent on their parents.

Percentage of Dependent Undergraduates Who Are Male, 2007-8, by Race and Income

	Lowest Income Quartile	Highest Income Quartile
White	44%	51%
Black	42%	48%
Latino	42%	48%
Asian	45%	52%

And the report notes the issue of age -- which may be increasingly important at a time when many adults past traditional college age are finding that they must return to college to advance professionally. Women appear much more likely than men to get that message, as women make up roughly two-thirds of undergraduates age 25 or older. Black and Native American female undergraduates 25 and older now outnumber those 24 or younger.

Jacqueline E. King, assistant vice president of ACE’s Center for Policy Analysis and author of the study, said in an interview that the results show that "we seem to have a new normal" and that it is reassuring that the gap isn't growing. She said that in terms of narrowing the gap, a key message is to "identify the sources of the gap" and not to assume that gender splits are taking place for the same reasons at every campus and among every group.

She offered as a hypothetical a college with a 56 percent female enrollment. The college might find that a night program for nontraditional students was two-thirds female, and so there may not be a need to focus on traditional age men, but there may be a need for an effort to recruit and graduate working adult men. King said that while each college must consider its own strategies, she was skeptical of blanket affirmative action programs for male students, especially given the data showing that male students from upper income levels are doing well.

Deborah A. Santiago, vice president for policy and research at Excelencia in Education, a group that advocates for Latino students in higher education, said that "systemic" changes may be needed to close the gender gap among Latino students.

She said that for many low-income Latino males, the opportunity costs of higher education seem too great, when they compare paying for college to "earning \$25 an hour in a construction job." Since many of these male students would in fact benefit from higher education, she said it was important to focus on solutions that recognize their short-term economic needs. College work-

study programs that recognize that many Latino males are contributing to family incomes, not just supporting themselves, may be one way to go, she said.

Latino males need work study "that keeps them engaged and on campus."

Richard Whitmire, author of the book and the blog [Why Boys Fail](#), said he was concerned about the new report's emphasis, even as he agreed that it is "good news" to see the gender gap stabilizing.

He said that the report "leaves the impression that except for minorities the gender gaps are no longer a cause for worry," an assumption he questions. "In today's economy, college is the new high school. You want to be a cop or work in a machine shop, you need post-high school study," he said. So stability at current levels "is hardly a positive sign."

Whitmire also said he questioned the idea that "gender gaps are really racial gaps." Why, he asked, are black girls growing up in the "same neighborhoods and same schools as their brothers" doing so much better than black boys at high school completion and college enrollment? "Solving racial learning gaps requires solving gender learning gaps," he said.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

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