

POLICY BRIEF

Where Are All the Men?:

A look at male vs. female postsecondary enrollment in North Carolina

by: Jenna A. Robinson and Shannon Watkins

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The majority of students sitting in college classrooms today are female. Decades-long efforts to increase female representation in academia appear to have worked—perhaps too well. Women carry two-thirds of all student-loan debt yet often major in the lowest-earning fields. An exception is the healthcare professions, in which women also dominate. North Carolina reflects national trends. The proportion of male enrollment in both the University of North Carolina System and the North Carolina Community College System has significantly decreased since 1980.

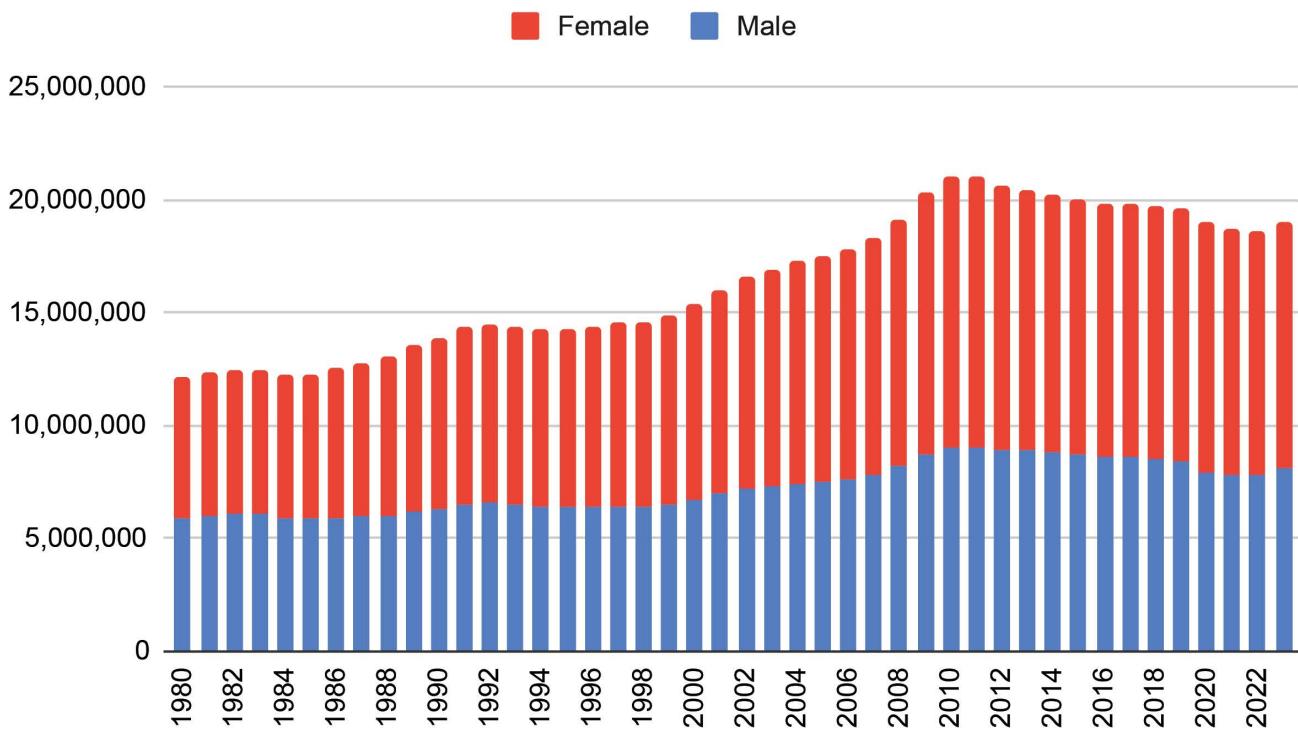
Fewer men are enrolling in part because fewer men are even applying to college. There are several explanations for why this might be the case. One is that a traditional college degree is not the best fit for men’s career aspirations. Another possibility is that the flawed K-12 system, where boys graduate at lower rates, is discouraging them from pursuing more education.

These and other factors are explored in this brief, followed by concrete recommendations for improvement.

NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that, on average, women outnumber men at America's colleges and universities. NCES reports, "In fall 2021, female students made up 58 percent of total undergraduate enrollment (8.9 million students), and male students made up 42 percent (6.5 million students).¹"

Table 1: Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, United States



Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES, Biennial Survey of Education in the United States

This pattern has been consistent since 1979, when female enrollment first eclipsed male enrollment. The trend has only accelerated since then. According to NCES,

Between 2010 and 2021, male enrollment decreased by 17 percent (from 7.8 million to 6.5 million students) and female enrollment decreased by 13 percent (from 10.2 million to 8.9 million students). Over this period, male enrollment saw its largest single-year decline in fall 2020 (7 percent), while female enrollment saw its largest single-year decline in fall 2021 (3 percent). In contrast, between 2021 and 2031, female and male enrollment are both projected to increase by 9 percent (to 9.7 and 7.1 million students, respectively).²

1 National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Postbaccalaureate Enrollment. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved June 16, 2023, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/chb>.

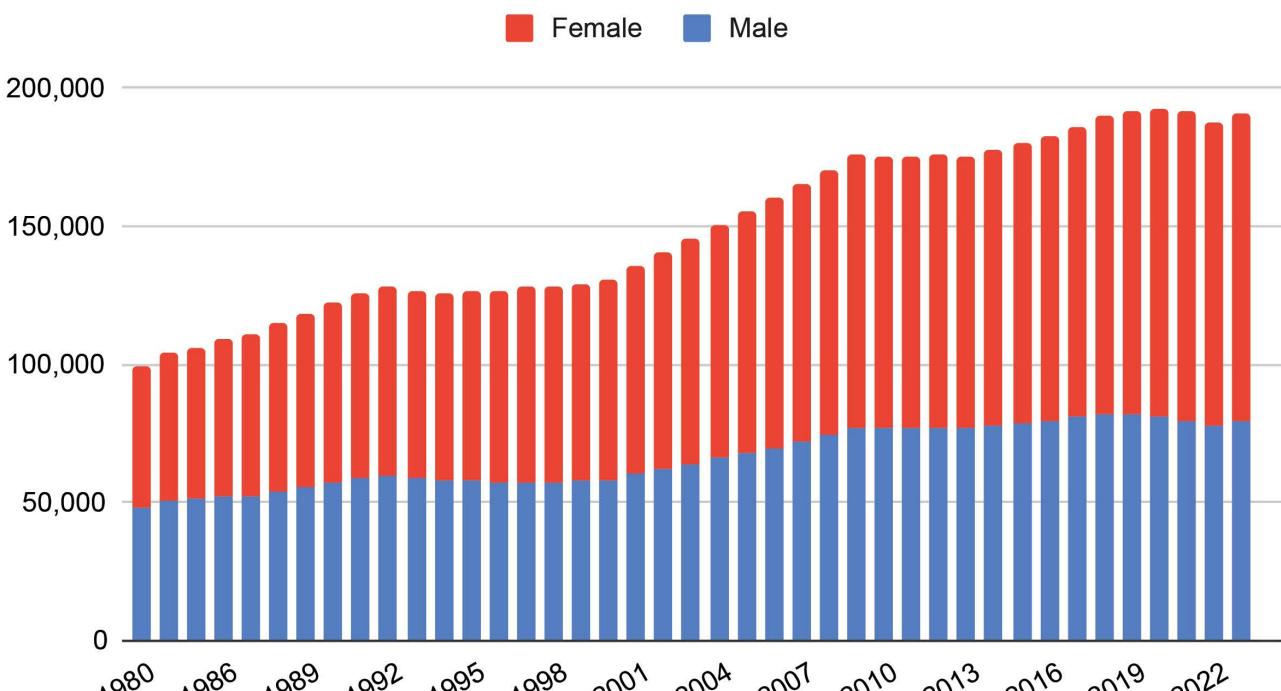
2 National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Undergraduate Enrollment. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved May 29, 2025, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cha>.

NORTH CAROLINA'S ENROLLMENT TRENDS

In both the University of North Carolina and North Carolina Community College Systems, male and female enrollment was close to 50-50 in 1980, with women edging out men very narrowly. In absolute terms, both male and female enrollment have increased since that time. However, by 2023, the proportion of male enrollment at North Carolina colleges and universities decreased significantly. Men constituted 41 percent of the undergraduate student body in the UNC System and 39 percent of the student body in the NCCC System. This is because more women than men enrolled and persisted in North Carolina colleges and universities.

In the University of North Carolina System, female undergraduate enrollment increased by 119 percent from 1980 to 2023. However, male undergraduate enrollment increased by only 65 percent in the same period.

Table 2: Undergraduate Enrollment in the UNC System



Source: IPEDS

In the North Carolina Community College System, female enrollment for both degree-seeking and non-degree students increased by 220 percent from 1980 to 2023. However, male enrollment increased by only 118 percent in the same period.

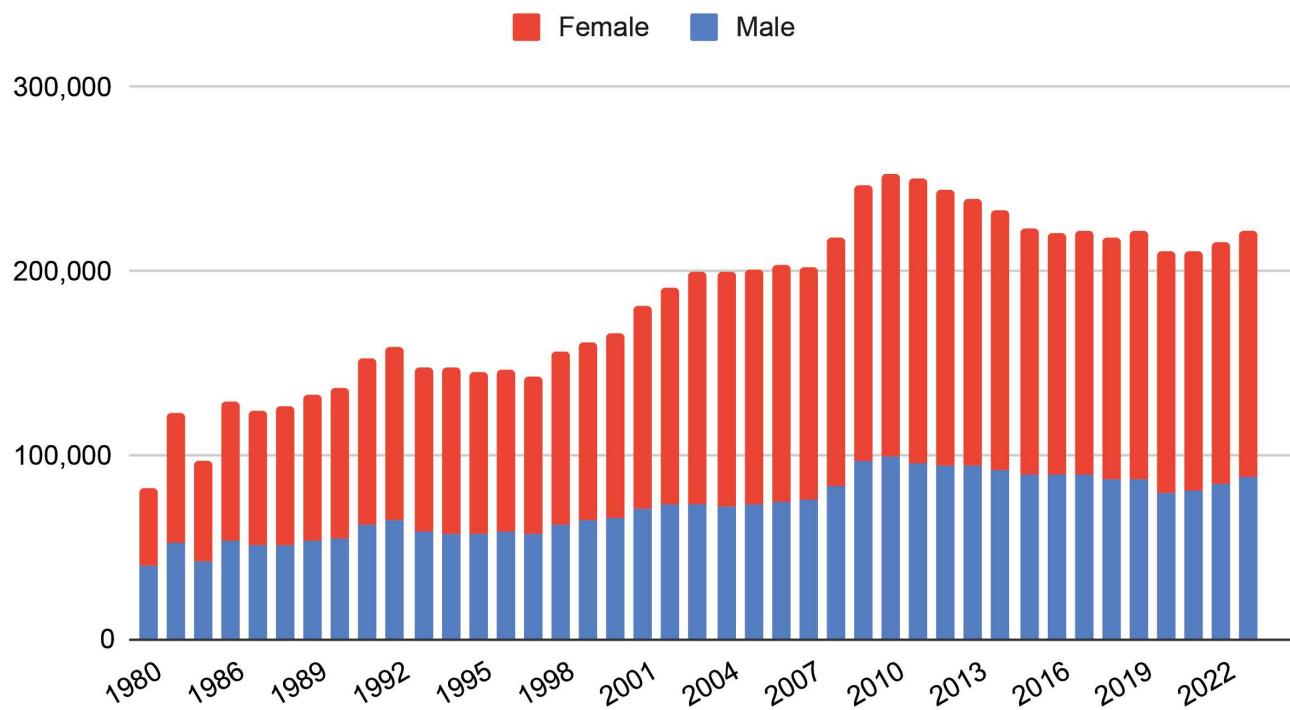
Table 3: Proportion of Male Enrollment from Fall 2015 to Fall 2024

	2015	2024
App State	44.88%	43.25%
ECU	40.63%	39.46%
ECSU	42.78%	47.92%
FSU	31.57%	31.80%
NC A&T	45.65%	38.51%
NCCU	33.27%	29.10%
NCSU	55.18%	50.37%
UNCA	44.00%	40.90%
UNC-CH	43.03%	39.52%
UNCC	50.80%	48.96%
UNCG	33.37%	32.66%
UNCP	37.53%	33.83%
UNCW	37.59%	35.01%
UNCSA	49.07%	41.40%
WCU	43.47%	40.81%
WSSU	28.47%	25.68%

Source: University of North Carolina System

Enrollment by gender varies greatly by institution. However, most schools had a larger proportion of male students in 2015 than in 2024. Elizabeth City State and Fayetteville State are the exceptions. NC State is the only university in the UNC System to have more male than female students in 2024.

Table 4: NC Community College System Enrollment (Degree & Nondegree)



Source: IPEDS

DISCUSSION

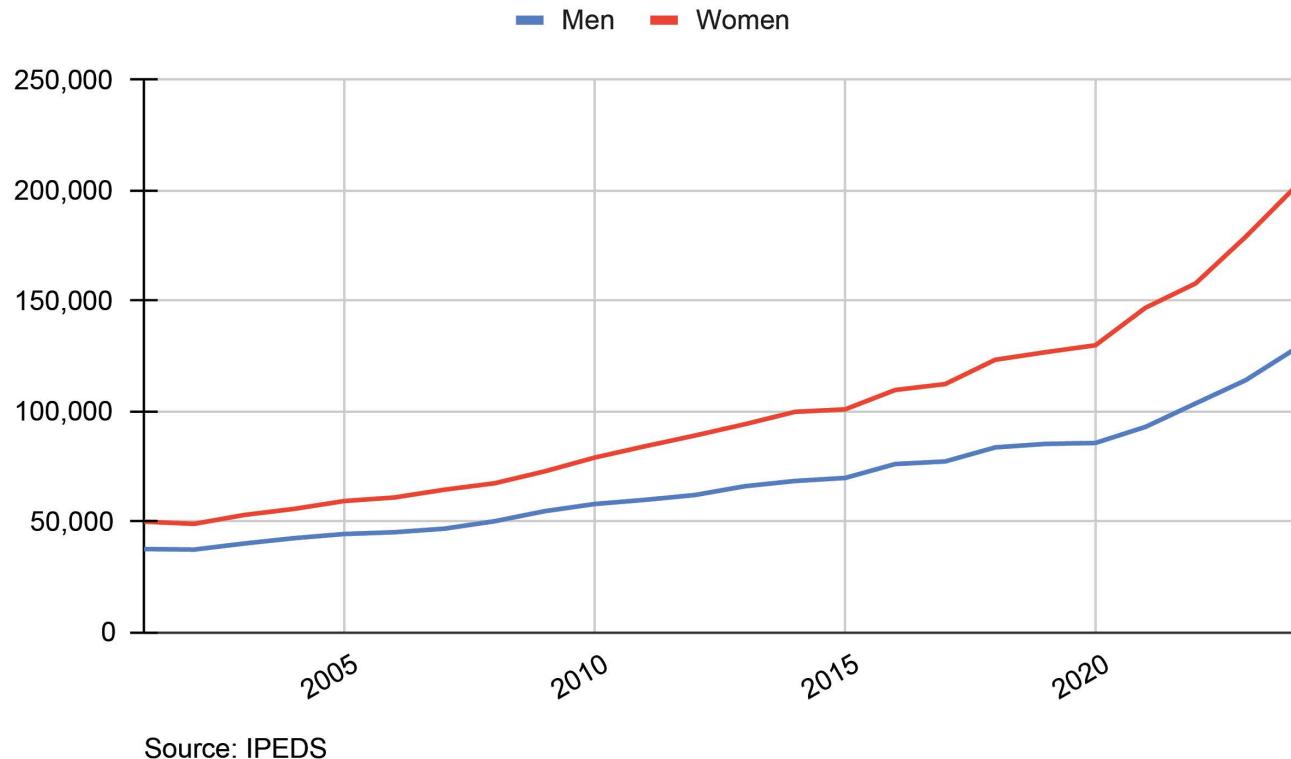
What is driving these uneven enrollment trends between men and women?

On its face, the fact that women outnumber men in higher education isn't itself a problem. The explanation for male underenrollment may vary. In some cases, men may be making a rational choice to opt out of college because it is not the best fit for their goals. There are several ways men in particular can attain high-paying jobs without a college credential, including through the trades, apprenticeships, and the military. This explanation for male underenrollment does not require remediation. College, particularly a four-year degree, is not for everyone and isn't the only path to success. This is supported by the fact that enrollment at public two-year vocational schools has grown about 20 percent in the last five years, according to data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.³

³ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Current Term Enrollment Estimates, May 22, 2025, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, <https://nscrclearinghouse.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>.

Additionally, substantially fewer men apply to college. A gap in applications has existed for at least two decades, but it has notably widened in recent years. In the 2024 academic year, 128,554 men applied for admission to a UNC System institution, while 201,877 women applied. It's not that large numbers of male applicants want to attend college and are turned away; they have a disproportionate lack of postsecondary interest from the start.

Table 5: Undergraduate Applications to UNC System Institutions



Source: IPEDS

Some men may be making prudent career choices; others, however, may be the product of a broken education system. For decades, American classrooms have operated in ways that are more conducive to female rather than male learning. Girls, who are more inclined to sit still for greater lengths of time, are not as affected by increased amounts of rote work and shorter recess periods. Reading material, furthermore, often caters to girls' interests. The kind of themes that capture boys' imagination, such as great battles, are discouraged or unavailable in the classroom.⁴ This extends to boys' creative output, as well. Boys have been shamed or corrected for drawing depictions of violence, such as soldiers at war.⁵

⁴ Frederick Hess, "What If Boys Like the 'Wrong' Kind of History?," *Education Next*, July 8, 2024, https://www.educationnext.org/what-if-boys-like-the-wrong-kind-of-history/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

⁵ Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know about the Emerging Science of Sex Differences* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 20-24.

Boys who go through an education system that stifles their interests and constrains their natural energy are set up to dislike or fail at school. Signing up for another two or four years of postsecondary education is likely an unattractive—sometimes an impossible—option for many young men. Boys, in fact, graduate high school at a lower rate than women.⁶ According to the Brookings Institute, high-school graduation rates are especially low among black boys⁷, which translates to lower enrollment of black men in colleges and universities.

In North Carolina public schools, male and female K-12 students performed similarly on key indicators. Girls outperformed boys in reading, while boys outperformed girls in math. Both groups had high rates of chronic absenteeism. Despite these performance similarities, boys graduate from high school at a slightly lower rate than girls. Girls also outpace boys in dual enrollment.

Table 6: K-12 Performance Metrics

	Male	Female
College-and-Career Ready in Reading	29%	32%
NAEP 4th Grade Reading (% at or above proficient)	26%	34%
College-and-Career Ready in Math	38%	35%
NAEP 8th Grade (% at or above proficient)	34%	28%
Chronic Absenteeism	27%	26%
Dual Enrollment Rate	10%	16%
Graduation Rate	85%	89%

Sources: MyFutureNC, NCCCS

The climate on college and university campuses could be another factor dissuading young men from joining the collegiate ranks. University messaging from the classroom to the president's office prizes feminine perspectives and female contributions to culture, the arts, and the sciences. Male accomplishments, on the other hand, are too often seen as a threat to gender equality. Masculinity is commonly portrayed as toxic.

It's also possible that men doubt the economic value of a college degree. According to an analysis by the *Financial Times*, men with a college degree and those without a degree have a similar unemployment rate. Given such an inhospitable campus atmosphere, coupled with rising college costs and a growing distrust of the value of higher education, it is not surprising that men are opting out of college altogether.

⁶ Associated Press, "Boys Graduate High School at Lower Rates Than Girls, With Lifelong Consequences," *AP News*, October 20, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/high-school-graduation-rate-boys-c7b8dff33221e0ded2d1369397d96455>.

⁷ Richard V. Reeves and Simran Kalkat, "Racial Disparities in the High School Graduation Gender Gap," *Brookings Institution*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/racial-disparities-in-the-high-school-graduation-gender-gap/>.

⁸ Preston Fore, "Gen Z Men With College Degrees Now Have the Same Unemployment Rate as Non-Grads — a Sign That the Higher Education Payoff Is Dead," *Fortune*, July 22, 2025, <https://fortune.com/2025/07/22/gen-z-college-graduate-unemployment-level-same-as-nongrads-no-degree-job-premium/>.

There are some exceptions to these trends. Highly selective, STEM-focused MIT, for instance, provides a counterexample where the enrollment of men and women is nearly equal. In the fall of 2023, MIT had 51.2 percent male and 48.8 percent female students out of a total of 4,576 undergraduate students.⁹

On the whole, however, women are likely to continue outpacing men in higher education.

This trend is a problem for universities because they are failing to convince a growing number of men that a college education is worth their time and financial investment. Men are perceiving real problems within higher education, namely rampant politicization and the poor return on investment of a college degree. Institutions need to cut the excesses and inefficiencies that make college unattractive.

It is also a problem for many men because some form of postsecondary education remains one of the main paths to securing a well-paying job. Men who forgo college with no alternative concrete plans are setting themselves up for a difficult and unstable future; young men without bachelor's degrees are more likely to drop out of the labor force than those with a college degree.¹⁰ Men who are not interested in academics should consider earning a credential through a community college, joining the military, or enrolling in an apprenticeship. Two-year colleges offer fast-track programs aimed at producing graduates in in-demand, well-paid careers. This skills-focused path is affordable and avoids many of the identity-based agendas rampant on four-year campuses.

For some women, this may be a problem because attending college can have more costs than benefits. Women dominate fields associated with low returns on investment, such as psychology, visual and performing arts, and English language and literature.¹¹ An analysis of the return on investment of about 30,000 bachelor's degrees found that these majors are among those that have very little, if any, payoff. "Some fields of study, including engineering, computer science, nursing, and economics, can produce returns of \$1 million or more. Others, including art, music, religion, and psychology, often have a zero or even negative net financial value," writes the report's author, Preston Cooper.¹² Given that women carry about two-thirds of all student-loan debt¹³ and are more likely to default on their loans,¹⁴ they should carefully consider which program of study, if any, is worth pursuing.

Finally, this is a problem for society to the extent that men who eschew college fail to choose any meaningful career path. College isn't a prerequisite for a flourishing life, but one bereft of goals and hard work is a recipe for individual and societal ills. The men who fall into the latter category are at least in part products of a broken educational system that stifles their action-oriented learning styles.

9 U.S. News & World Report, "Massachusetts Institute of Technology — Student Life," *U.S. News Best Colleges*, accessed January 29, 2026, <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/massachusetts-institute-of-technology-2178/student-life>.

10 Sara Estep and Christian E. Weller, "Gen Z Men at Work: 10 Facts About Young Men's Employment Trends," *Center for American Progress*, August 26, 2025, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/gen-z-men-at-work-10-facts-about-young-mens-employment-trends/>.

11 Ravan Hawrami and Alanna Williams, "Major Changes: Gender Shifts in Undergraduate Studies Over Time," *American Institute for Boys and Men*, April 3, 2025, <https://aibm.org/research/major-changes-gender-shifts-in-undergraduate-studies-over-time/>.

12 Preston Cooper, "Is College Worth It? A Comprehensive Return on Investment Analysis," FREOPP (white paper), accessed January 22, 2026, <https://freopp.org/whitepapers/is-college-worth-it-a-comprehensive-return-on-investment-analysis/>.

13 Melanie Hanson, "Student Loan Debt by Gender," *Education Data Initiative*, last modified February 22, 2025, <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-by-gender>.

14 Lexi West, Ama Takyi-Laryea, and Ilan Levine, "Student Loan Borrowers With Certain Demographic Characteristics More Likely to Experience Default," The Pew Charitable Trusts, January 24, 2023, updated January 25, 2023, <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/01/24/student-loan-borrowers-with-certain-demographic-characteristics-more-likely-to-experience-default>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Colleges and universities can take several concrete steps to remove barriers to male enrollment. Trustees and administrators should:

- **Return to Standardized Tests.** Competitive institutions should use standardized tests in admissions. Girls generally outperform boys in the classroom,¹⁵ but boys outperform girls on standardized tests.¹⁶ Using both high-school GPA and standardized tests in admissions will put men and women on the same footing for college admissions.
- **End all discrimination against men.** This includes women-only scholarships and programs that attract only female applicants to campus. Such programs are already illegal under federal law but often still exist on campuses. “No existing public race- or sex-based scholarship meets those SFFA tests or the textual requirements in the Title VI and IX.”¹⁷
- **Expand Career-Oriented Pathways.** Enhance high-quality technical and career-oriented programs, particularly in fields with high male interest (e.g., IT, construction management, cybersecurity, automotive technology). Develop stackable credentials and earn-while-you-learn models that appeal to students seeking a direct return on investment.
- **Promote Alternative Admissions Pipelines.** Offer dual-enrollment career- and technical-education pathways, apprenticeships, or military-to-college bridge programs. Facilitate credit for prior learning in community colleges and universities.
- **Market Workforce Pell.** Starting in high school, promote awareness of new financial aid opportunities for short-term credentials.

Society must also change. In an age where white-collar jobs such as coding and copywriting can be outsourced to AI, Americans should have greater respect for jobs that don’t require a college degree. We must destigmatize workers who have taken alternate paths to their careers. Apprenticeships, the military, or short-term credentials are valid paths to career success.

15 Thomas A. DiPrete and Claudia Buchmann, *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What It Means for American Schools* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013).

16 Claudia Buchmann, Thomas A. DiPrete, and Anne McDaniel, “Gender Inequalities in Education,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 319–37.

17 George R. La Noue, “Are Identity-Based Scholarships Illegal?,” *Law & Liberty*, May 27, 2025, <https://lawliberty.org/are-identity-based-scholarships-illegal/>.

About the authors

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