

James Shelley
Director, Men's Resource Center
Lakeland Community College
Kirtland, Ohio
440-525-7447
jshelley@lakelandcc.edu

Ten Reasons Why Men Aren't Going to College

The gap between the number of males and females in our nation's colleges and universities continues to widen. In recent years, 57% of undergraduate degrees were awarded to women, 43% to men. At community colleges the gender gap is even wider. While this disparity has attracted national attention for almost a decade, there has been little discussion of possible causes.

As director, since 1996, of one of the few Men's Centers at an American college, I've had a vested interest in this growing gender chasm. Here are ten reasons why men may not be going to college or, when they do, why they trail women academically.

1. *The allure of a "good job" out of high school.* There are arguably more high paying jobs for a male high school graduate than a female. But most of these jobs are either hazardous, manufacturing based, physically demanding, or all three. What happens to that high school graduate (or drop out), ten, twenty, thirty years later?

For some, their jobs are "off-shored" to Mexico or Asia. For others, their bodies become damaged, or worn out, and they must seek less rigorous work. Whichever the case, if they are the primary breadwinners in their families, it is problematic for them to divert time from wage earning to "re-tooling" their skills as middle-aged students at the local community college. Most often, they will accept a lower paying job in lieu of

additional education. To make up the wage loss, their spouses must increase their contribution to the family income.

2. *The gender cleansing of “boy behavior” in kindergarten through 12th grades.* Studies indicate that movement, especially for young boys in the motor stage of development, helps students learn. But in order to make extra time to meet state proficiency requirements, most schools have drastically reduced time for recess. Add to this zero-tolerance, zero-conflict, zero-noise policies which severely punish (mostly male) behaviors that used to be dismissed with a stern warning. Is it any wonder that, according to a University of Michigan Study, the number of boys who said they disliked school rose 71% between 1980 and 2001?

3. *Education as a factor in career success is more important to women.* Perceiving that the workplace is still a man’s world, the female students I talk to universally believe that they need all the educational “backing” they can obtain in order to succeed professionally.

4. *Title IX.* This controversial federal law requires that participation in inter-collegiate sports reflect gender enrollment ratios. If a college has 58% female enrollment, then having less than 58% women in its athletic programs can be judged as unlawful sex discrimination. Yet, every college admissions office knows that one of the most effective ways to increase male enrollment would be to expand, not reduce, opportunities for male athletes.

5. *Indifference to the growing literacy gap.* In Ohio, 12th grade boys trail girls 10% in reading scores and 14% in writing. In effect, the boys are two years behind. Despite this, there are no programs in Ohio, or any other state, to help close the gender

literacy gap. By contrast, Great Britain has made significant strides in closing the gender literacy gap since recognizing it as a national problem in 1993. (The math gap, by the way, is 6%, boys leading. But this gap has been narrowing, mainly due to special programs and text book changes more attuned to girls' learning styles.)

6. *Women have a more cooperative approach to learning, men a more independent approach.* At Lakeland, a female is 33% more likely to use academic support services (e.g. counseling, tutoring, etc.) than a male. They are even more likely to approach a professor or another student for a post-class discussion. Women are better at developing the web of supportive relationships necessary to achieve success in college.

7. *Fewer, non-government financial aid opportunities are available to our sons.* Do a google search, "College financial aid for women". Do the same search for men. No matter how you phrase the query, there are usually twice as many links for women.

8. *Lack of a Major War Requiring a Draft.* The last three spikes in male enrollments occurred after World War Two, The Korean Conflict, and the Viet Nam War. The G.I. Bill enabled the millions of young men who survived those wars to go to college for free. Let us hope that this is not the only effective way to increase male college enrollment.

9. *An embedded belief on college campuses that "Men are the problem" as opposed to "Men have problems too".* This is epitomized in date rape prevention programs, now mandatory for freshmen men at most four-year colleges and universities. Although well-intentioned, these programs are welcoming young men to college by essentially telling them that they are potential rapists.

10. *Negative media images of men.* Watch 100 TV commercials in which there is interaction between males and females. In commercials where one of the genders is depicted as less intelligent, nearly 100% of the time it will be a male. Funny, yes. But does anyone ever wonder about the cumulative effect on our sons? At what point do they subconsciously start believing it?

Perhaps they already do. When I walk the hallways of my college, the young men generally look less mature than the women. With their baseball caps and baggy pants, they look like overgrown 12 year old boys, not 18 to 24 year-old men. Historically, the fastest way for a young man to enter the world of men was to look more mature and smarter than his actual years. What makes our young men want to look less mature and dumber?

One of the obstacles to developing gender-specific, educational approaches that will help boys—as well as to the creation of men’s programs at colleges---is a dismissive sentiment in our society that says: “Men still have all the power (and the higher pay), so why worry about boys”? Let us, for a moment, agree with the belief that men still have all the power. Isn’t that reason enough to pay closer attention to the education of our sons?