

Stuck on the Sidelines: How philanthropy can reduce the college gender gap

THE TAKEAWAY

Too many men are missing out on the benefits of higher education. Vermont philanthropy can help change this picture and at the same time continue to support the impressive gains made by female students. Charitable individuals can act by supporting:

- Efforts to encourage men to pursue degrees in fields where they are underrepresented
- Programs that help male high school students prepare academically and get excited about college
- Scholarships and advocacy to control tuition costs



ENROLLMENT AT VERMONT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES declined [9.6 percent](#) between 2015 and 2020, about twice the national rate, which is discouraging news for individuals and the state's economy.

There's a solution that deserves more attention. It's to convince the men in Vermont who are sitting on the sidelines of postsecondary education to get off the bench and onto the field. Women outnumber men on most campuses in Vermont and the nation, and not by just a little bit. At the University of Vermont, only 33 percent of this fall's first-year class is male, one of the lowest proportions in the school's history. At the Community College of Vermont, which offers some of the most affordable

pathways to degrees and career training in the state, women typically represent 65 to 70 percent of student enrollment.

Statewide, women represented 56 percent of the 39,646 postsecondary students enrolled in 2020, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That translates to [4,570 more women than men](#) on campus in Vermont. If the missing men were students at a college, it would have a larger student body than most of the postsecondary schools in Vermont.

Women have caught up and outpaced men on many education measures since the passage of the federal education equality law Title IX fifty years ago. This tremendous progress should be



celebrated, but it is also important to help boys and men fully tap the opportunity that education can bring. The lopsided numbers on campus don't start there. Girls outperform boys at many levels in the K–12 education system. A new [state-by-state](#) analysis by the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., found that Vermont has among the largest gender gaps in the country when it comes to English language arts scores, for example. Indicators like this contribute to the fact that Vermont women ages 25 to 34 are about 30 percent more likely to have a bachelor's degree

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than men, according to the Brookings Institution study, "Boys Left Behind: Education gender gaps across the U.S." Meanwhile, Vermont men are overrepresented in troubling social outcomes such as opiate overdoses, suicide, and incarceration.

Still, it should be said loud and clear: Efforts to help more men succeed on campus should not come at the expense of helping women. It's critical to recognize that even with the impressive

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gains women have made, they need continuing support on a number of fronts, including to rectify stubborn wage gaps, which show Vermont women earning about 93 cents on the dollar to what men earn. Women are still underrepresented in lucrative STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) fields, and in top corporate jobs and politics. Moreover, philanthropy should continue to build support for career training, certificates, and two-year degrees for all students, regardless of gender, allowing them to leverage those credentials toward four-year degrees if they wish.

That being said, it's important to take the issue of gender equality seriously in both directions, and philanthropy can help do that, said Richard V. Reeves, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of the new book, "Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It."

Some of the strategies that have helped open opportunity for women on campus could inform efforts that are directed at boys and men. "I think that philanthropy has played a huge role in changing the narrative about what it means to be a girl or woman," Reeves said. "And really lifted up girls and women in a way that's just been spectacular."

It's time to study what might work for boys, especially boys from historically marginalized groups, and harness charitable giving to help more of them get to college. "As innovators, I would urge philanthropy to actually be looking into this space and to some extent be pioneers," said Reeves, who is also an expert on economic equity and delivered the keynote speech at the Vermont Community Foundation's 2018 Annual Meeting.

Here's how philanthropy can help:

Support efforts to encourage men to pursue degrees in fields where they are underrepresented

One idea gaining traction is creating more support for men to pursue degrees in fields such as nursing and teaching.

A 2021 Vermont Nursing Board survey found only nine percent of licensed nurses in Vermont are male, for example. About 25 percent of teachers are male, according to national statistics.

Encouraging more men to enter these fields can have multiple benefits. On a societal level, it creates a broader pool of people to help fill high-demand jobs, too many of which are vacant in Vermont. It also opens more opportunity for individuals and throws off strait-jacketed stereotypes. Just as women make good engineers and construction executives, men make good first-grade teachers and nurses.

Charitable individuals can support scholarships and advocacy to help male students enter these fields. The American Association for Men in Nursing, a national nonprofit, offers financial help and organizes conferences and networking that encourage men to consider the field. When it comes to teaching, there are numerous national advocacy programs to encourage BIPOC men, in particular, to enter the profession, such as the National Association of Black Male Educators. Meanwhile, giving to the Vermont State Colleges system can help expand the reach of new state-funded scholarships designed to support students, including men, who pursue degrees in high-demand fields such as nursing. The career ladder approach at Vermont Technical College allows students to gradually gain credentials, from a practical nursing certificate to a Bachelor of Science in nursing, and potentially work in their field as they study. Support for this approach goes a long way toward making postsecondary education accessible.



Support programs that improve academic preparation and Vermont's college-going rate

Between 48 and 52 percent of Vermont high school graduates immediately go on to postsecondary education, a lackluster rate compared to neighboring states such as Massachusetts. Vermont should work hard to increase college-going rates, said Jay Jacobs, vice provost for enrollment management at the University of Vermont (UVM). He suggests that even if the efforts don't specifically target men, they will likely capture more men and "therefore lift all of us up."

UVM's gender gap has been in place for more than a decade but appears to be widening. While about 37 percent of the undergraduate student body is male, that number dropped to 33 percent in this fall's entering class. It's hard to say why, Jacobs said. High inflation and the lingering economic strain of the pandemic might be prompting more young men to go straight to the job market. "We are also seeing that the men who do apply to us are much less prepared than the women who apply to us," Jacobs said. This problem appears to have worsened during the pandemic. As Jacobs puts it, "The preparedness gap is increasing."

UVM is considering a marketing campaign that would be specifically targeted to men, even if it's as simple as putting more men in the pictures and testing different kinds of headlines. "We're trying to understand what men will react to, or engage with, more than they have been recently," Jacobs said. He believes it's important to close the gender gap for many reasons. First, men who do not enroll are missing an opportunity to interact with a broad range of people, including those who are different from them. They are also missing out on development of critical thinking, communication skills, and deep engagement with academic content, Jacobs said. "There is an inherent value in higher education."



Closing the gap also matters for the university itself, he added, so that the perspective on campus is diverse and equitable, and so that it is reflective of the community off campus. "So, I think we, as an institution, need to be thinking about this."

Charitable individuals can support programs that help students prepare academically and visualize themselves on campus, again recognizing that

even when these programs are marketed to both boys and girls, boosting access could resonate with boys in new ways. The Vermont Student Assistance Corporation's Talent Search, GEAR-UP, and other programs for high school students are all working to increase preparation and enrollment, as is the Boys and Girls Club of Burlington, with its Early Promise college scholarship program that starts with first-graders who sign a contract pledging to do well in school and contribute to their community.

Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC), a statewide program based in Richmond, helps build college readiness skills and connects participants to postsecondary scholarships, course credits at Community College of Vermont, and certifications/training that can jump-start interest in two or four-year degrees. Participants who learn carpentry skills as they build backcountry huts may go on to study engineering or construction management. A wilderness first-responder certification could be the first step for someone who pursues a degree in an allied health field. Growing food can trigger interest in fields such as nutrition or agricultural sciences. All the programs emphasize collaboration, meeting goals, and belonging.

"In order to be successful at school, in jobs, you need to have the executive skills to take care of yourself and take care of the group, be accountable," said Breck

Knauff, executive director of VYCC. "I actually see a lot of overlap between the expectations and the support that we have here and the expectations and the skills that are needed in higher ed." With programs for teens ages 15 to 17, and for young adults, VYCC crew members come in with a range of education goals and experiences. For all participants, including males, females, nonbinary, and trans crew members, the programs help



participants build skills and career aspirations. The VYCC attracts slightly more male than female participants, and Knauft sees different trends at play when it comes to college goals. He thinks some young men aren't pursuing college for reasons that go beyond cost of tuition. Part of the problem is that they can't picture themselves on campus and may lack meaningful role models in an era when social changes are to some extent redefining what it means to be a man, he said. "I see young men often adrift and trying to find their place." The VYCC programs strive to build a sense of empowerment for all participants. "Knowing that you made a positive difference fosters a sense of value and purpose and that's not a benefit specifically to men, but for all the men in the program, it's terrific," Knauft said.

Support efforts to keep tuition affordable

Inflation and a shaky economy could make it more tempting for young men to bypass college for the job market, possibly limiting their long-term career options. These factors make it even more important for donors to support scholarships and pilot programs to make college more affordable, including programs that target geographical areas of the state with lower college completion rates. Another option is giving to help innovative programs that remove barriers for students through the Access to Higher Education Fund, a discretionary fund of the Vermont Community Foundation. The J. Warren and Lois McClure Foundation, a supporting organization of the Vermont Community Foundation, is also helping on this front with a partnership that could erase tuition for Vermont's high school classes of 2023 to 2026. The McClure Free Degree Promise through the Early College Program at Community College of Vermont appears to be generating new enrollment and excitement among students. Joyce Judy, president of the Community College of Vermont (CCV), said increasing enrollment among men is a goal. "We are very successful with some young men, and I wish we were successful with more of them."

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When they do enroll, men tend to gravitate toward business and technology programs and not to allied health or early childhood education, Judy said. It's not easy to change those patterns but just as the college wants to encourage more women to pursue STEM courses, it wants to encourage men to consider degrees where they are underrepresented. "It's on our minds to recruit men into these non-traditional roles," Judy said.

CCV will continue to work on strategies that recognize existing gaps but don't leave anyone out. "Our issue is, we want to attract women and we want to attract men," Judy said. "It's not a zero-sum game."

Deeper Reading

[Brookings Institution Boys and Men Project](#)

[The Pandemic and Men Disappearing From College](#)

[McClure Free Degree Promise](#)

[Richard Reeves Keynote Speech at 2018 Vermont Community Foundation](#)

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