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## Requiem for the great American college man

### Higher education faces a new kind of gender gap.

By James Shelley and Stephen F. Gambescia

Policymakers may be too busy cutting college funding to listen to one more jeremiad about the state of higher education in America. There is one impending crisis, however, that has received scant attention and, when it is noted, has been met with more indifference than concern.

That crisis is the disappearance of men from our college campuses.

Men make up 42 percent of enrollment in American college-degree programs. At smaller schools, that share can drop to as little as 30 percent. Adult degree-completion programs have seen women outnumbering men for years, accounting for as much as 80 percent of enrollment. Except for in medicine and law, where the sexes are almost equal, women are well outpacing men at all levels and kinds of degrees awarded.

For women to attain higher education in such large numbers has required remarkable progress; the female share of American college enrollment has more than doubled since 1970. But the new question about equality on college campuses, ironically enough, is whether there are enough male students for a healthy learning environment.

One obstacle to efforts to increase the enrollment and retention of male students is the dismissive assertion that men still hold disproportionate power in boardrooms, legislatures, etc., so what's the problem? In the new economy, though, traditionally male-dominated jobs are in decline, and male unemployment and career stagnation are on the rise, leaving many men with very little power. And history and sociology tell us that men who lack a sense of purpose - especially younger men - will create problems in society.

President Obama's goal of making the U.S. citizenry the world's most highly educated within a decade cannot succeed if half our eligible citizens are backsliding in the area of college attendance. Similarly, given all the talk about the shift to a knowledge economy, the need to compete globally, and the shortage of students entering science and technology majors, it's surprising that there's scant discussion of the male enrollment lag.

We need to look at the causes of this dramatic shift away from male college enrollment. It turns out that men are trailing women in almost every major educational indicator at all scholastic levels, including the two most critical: reading and writing. Both of these skills are indispensable in the new economy.

While math curricula have been altered to accommodate girls' learning styles and close the gender gap in that subject, the literacy gap - which is more than twice as wide, with boys lagging - continues to widen. Unless addressed, boys' general dislike of reading and writing can lead to a lifelong aversion to education.

At the same time, programs designed to prevent bad behavior are becoming mandatory for freshmen men at more and more colleges. These efforts, though well-meaning, are nonetheless welcoming young men to college campuses by implicating them as potential sexual predators and miscreants. And even as men with high risk profiles are greeted with overt skepticism about their prospects, many women with high risk profiles - e.g., single mothers - enjoy support programs designed to improve their chances.

Meanwhile, for middle-aged men who have lost their jobs or careers in the new economy, going back to college is usually impractical. Having established themselves as the primary breadwinners for their families, they cannot afford the loss of income that results from a full-time learning commitment. Most dislocated male workers will instead opt for lower-paying jobs. To make up for lost income, they will either take a second low-paying job or urge their spouses to enter the workforce.

There are still more higher-paying jobs for men than for women among high school graduates who don't go to college. But these jobs are often hazardous, manufacturing-based, physically demanding, or all three. Many of the men in these jobs will end up injured, chronically ailing, unemployed, or lacking the skills they need for advancement.

There is enough evidence that this problem is systemic and that the trend is downward. A first step toward reversing it might be an adjustment of our view of male students. Instead of seeing men as the problem, we should recognize that they

*have* problems, too.

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James Shelley is director of the Men's Resource Center at Lakeland Community College in Kirkland, Ohio. Stephen F. Gambescia is an associate professor and assistant dean at the Drexel University College of Nursing and Health Professions. They can be reached at [jshelley@lakelandcc.edu](mailto:jshelley@lakelandcc.edu) and [sfg23@drexel.edu](mailto:sfg23@drexel.edu).

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