

Women lead ranks of degree seekers

by Victor Greto
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Girls rule.

At least in higher education.

While women have been the majority of college students for about two decades, recent Census figures show that nationally, their numbers have risen to 56 percent. In addition, women today earn the majority percentage of all degrees except doctorates.

In the past few years, more women than men received bachelor degrees in science-related fields. Even in traditionally male-dominated fields such as engineering, architecture and mathematics, women cut the gap by as much as 20 percent from a decade ago.

The reasons for the phenomenon are many, said Lynn Appleton, a sociologist at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Fla. But the more fundamental reasons, she said, focus on the changing family.

For example, she said, because many contemporary families feel the need for two incomes, "many women who may not have prepared themselves for the workforce 30 years ago now assume they will have to hold a job."

Beginning in the 1970s, she said, "the opening of no-fault divorce meant Americans could end emotionally unsatisfying marriages, which created a couple of generations of divorced American women who descended into near poverty because they held no credentials to work. Their daughters have vowed this will not happen to them."

There is no stereotypical woman who attends college.

Stacy Phillips, 35, decided to change her life after giving birth to her daughter Julia more than six years ago.

Now living with her mother in Plantation, Fla., the recently divorced woman decided she would go to FAU's main campus in Boca Raton full-time and earn the credits to become a middle school teacher.

Because, she said, "I would then get the same days off as Julia, the same vacations, including the whole summer."

But she didn't just plunge into it.

After Julia's birth in November 1995, she worked another year full time as a claims adjuster, saving more than \$10,000 in anticipation of the dry years ahead.

She now has only a spring and summer semester to

go before her dream comes true.

"I would have never gone back to school if I didn't have Julia," Phillips said.

The trend has evolved into a social phenomenon, for while there are slightly more women than men in the U.S., according to the 2000 Census, there are more men than women under the age of 25.

Though there are differences among racial and ethnic groups as to who is more likely to attend college - whites, for example, are more likely to attend than blacks - the women in each group outnumber the men in attendance.

Tom Mortenson, a public policy analyst for the Center for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education in Washington, attributes the shift to the country's century-long evolution from an industrial to a service economy, which, he said, favors women.

The beginning of the decline in male participation in college goes back to the late 19th century, when men dominated all aspects of higher education. What stopped the rates from going down even faster were what Mortenson calls "two artificial spikes," the 1944 GI Bill, which financially encouraged returning World War II veterans to go to school, and the Vietnam-era law that exempted male college students from the draft.

In South Florida today, Appleton said, "lots of our working-class male students are going straight into the workforce and their sisters are saying, 'What kind of job can I get? Checkout line? Maid?' They're not good options, so they go to the community college, then on to the university."

Male students are adapting to the situation, said Marquise Kiffin, 21, a senior majoring in education at the private Nova Southeastern University in Davie, Fla.

"I feel as if it impacted me in a positive matter," Kiffin said. "You kind of understand how (women) think. You really become aware of what you're saying and how you're saying it."

Not only that, Kiffin said, "I actually care about hurting their feelings." But don't think college has become a single man's delight,

either.

"It's easier in the sense there are a lot of women to choose from," he said, "but (NSU) being a small school, people talk. As far as dating, I think (the uneven ratio) does play a role, but more for the women. I always hear the women complaining because there aren't enough

guys."

The one thing that seems to have stayed the same, however, is the vast difference in pay between men and women. Mean income for women college graduates is nearly half the income of their male counterparts.

The prospects for salaries rising remains grim, said William Dorfman, a professor of psychology at NSU, who has seen women increasingly dominate the graduate student body at the college.

The reasons focus on the number of roles women try to fulfill, and the law of supply and demand, he said.

"The 'feminization' of those professions leads to lower pay across the board," Dorfman said.

Historically, he said, female-dominated fields such as teaching and nursing pay comparatively low. As more women enter professions such as psychology and medicine, expect the salaries to go down and more men leave those professions.

"A lot of women graduate from our program," Dorfman said. "get married, work in the profession for a year or two, then leave the full-time career to have a baby. They may come back into it down the road, but the demands of family, marriage and children put them at a disadvantage for negotiation for higher salaries - and schools and (law) firms can take advantage of it."

Men go into fields such as engineering, computers, even accounting, because the salaries are still high, he said.

"Women have moved into the professions, but all the time they've done it, they've had to maintain the nurturers' role," Dorfman said, "and the way to survive is to do it part-time. As soon as you do that, you can't demand the same kinds of salaries."



Stacy Phillips, an English major at Florida Atlantic University, is shown with her daughter Julia. Phillips decided at the age of 35 to begin working on her teaching degree.

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