



**The Trouble With Boys:  
Observations about Boys' Post-Secondary Aspirations, Attendance and  
Success**

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## **The Trouble With Boys: Observations about Boys' Post-Secondary Aspirations, Attendance and Success**

The popular media is filled with stories about the sorry state of boys in the US. Their graduation rates are lower than that of girls; fewer boys than girls attend college; and the college graduation rates for girls are higher than for boys. But some analysts question whether this apparent inequity is truly a problem or simply the predictable outcome of programs designed to promote college attendance by women during the past two decades – an “adjustment” of sorts. In fact, college admission and attendance rates are rising for *both* girls and boys. The rates for girls are simply rising faster, an effect attributed to the momentum created by programs to equalize attendance rates between boys and girls that have propelled girls’ rates past those of their male peers.

Regardless of whether these circumstances comprise a “problem” or not, the bottom line is that boys are being outpaced by girls for participation in post-secondary education, especially among poor, minority and rural populations. That is an unacceptable waste of human resources. Therefore, the most significant remaining questions are: “Why is this happening?” and “What can be done about it?”

Boys have a slight advantage in the number of live births in the US (about 101:100), so, all things being equal, it is reasonable to assume that they would populate institutions at about the same rate as girls. However, institutions are social structures, and in social systems all things are almost *never* equal, so, clearly, there are other forces operating to produce imbalances in high school graduation, college attendance and college completion. The remainder of this paper is devoted to the examination of these forces, some of which are well-documented in research, others supported in theory, and still others more speculative but still useful for creating or adjusting interventions to promote boys’ college attendance and success.

Like many issues in education, this one is tremendously complex and results from the interplay of social, economic, psychological, educational, and community factors. However, it is unrealistic to believe that any single institution, such as the school, can mount an effective intervention in all of these areas and still do their core job of teaching content and skills to their students. Although this essay explores each of those contributory factors in some detail, the final recommendations for successful interventions assumes (1) that the program is school and community based, (2) a comprehensive program will address multiple factors, and (3) such programs may not be focused on boys exclusively (in accordance with most district policies and both state and federal law), but will be integrated into more comprehensive programs to promote college achievement. Also, for the purposes of this paper, much of the information addresses characteristics and conditions of boys who are the most unlikely to attend college (e.g., poor, minority, urban or rural) rather than those who are likely to be college-bound regardless of special interventions.

### Psychological-Developmental Factors

Although generalizations are difficult to apply across individuals in any given group, boys tend to mature somewhat more slowly than girls – psychologically, socially and emotionally. They

tend to remain focused on short-term goals longer during their K-12 school years and do not begin to think about college, careers, and adult life as soon as girls do. As a result, they may not be as aware of the preparation needed for college or a specific career until quite late in their high school program, often too late to get the prerequisite courses they need to pursue their goals.

Even those boys who prize “doing well in school” may not connect their school performance to a college or career interest to the same extent that girls do. “Doing well” may be seen as an end in itself – or an effort to get immediate approval (or stay eligible for a sport) – rather than part of a comprehensive, or even skeletal, plan for a career track.

Boys are somewhat less likely to take emotional and psychological risks than girls, such as leaving the family home or moving away from the geographic area. In cases where they do make such a move, it is often to join another very stable social unit – such as the military. And despite the horrific risks of combat, most military life is characterized by stability, predictable routines, and a ready-made peer group. Although it is not entirely clear, there is some evidence that boys who move away to attend college have a more difficult time adjusting to that less-structured environment than girls, who are somewhat more likely to form friendships and embrace institutional norms more quickly.

Related to maturity is institutional adjustment, and boys respond somewhat more poorly to the regulated, controlled environment of conventional schooling than do girls. Among males, particularly in poor, minority and working class communities, maturity is associated with behavioral independence and “not being pushed around” by a boss or the system.

Some researchers have found that family stories may even showcase and celebrate events of opposition to authority -- where someone stood up to or told their boss (or teacher, or company representative, or police officer) that “I’m not going to put up with any more of your [fill in the blank]” or “I’m not going to take that kind of [fill in the blank] from you!” In fact, achieving independence from repressive rules, teachers or administrators is one of the top reasons boys give for dropping out of school. Often, the precipitating event is a conflict over a rule that the student (and sometimes the parents) find capricious, unfair or unreasonable.

### Family and Community

For boys from families with no history of college attendance, familial and other close role models do not necessarily present intellectual attainment as a “masculine” trait. Images of masculinity are often associated with physical prowess, especially among boys from working class and poor families. Strength, endurance, and courage in the face of risk or danger are among the most highly prized masculine characteristics. Among many boys, especially from working class communities, college educated men may actually be seen as somewhat “snobbish,” or “soft” or less-than-masculine.

These perceptions tend to stem from the fact that in many communities there are very few role models of men who perform intellectual “work,” and those are confined mostly to school. For boys already struggling with academic work or school adjustment, the kind of work done by adult men in schools is not likely to be seen as very desirable. This is complicated by the fact

that boys do a very poor job of estimating what a teacher or school administrator actually earns and the amount of college-level preparation it takes to get one of these jobs. So even among boys who might see teaching as a viable occupation, they are not very good at estimating the “cost-benefits” of the job – the amount of time and money that must be devoted to college attendance and what the ultimate pay-off might be.

Finally, many communities have an abundance of adults or near-adults who have not been successful in school and may even deride efforts made by current students to excel or aspire to college. Surrounded by high school dropouts, it is very difficult for a young person to pursue academic goals in the absence of a supportive peer group or even adults who, at best, may give only lip-service to the importance of education because they have had little success with it themselves. It’s not hard to imagine an adolescent retort to a parent who encourages him or her to do well in school: “Why should I stay in school? You didn’t!” And no matter how sincerely a parent might express her regrets over failing to do well in school, or how earnest she is in trying to convince her child that she wants something better for him or her, Emerson’s famous quote captures the plight of poorly educated parents trying to convince their children to remain in school and aspire to college: “What you are thunders so loudly I cannot hear what you say.”

### Jobs and Economics

Family roles for boys often include contributing to the family welfare in material ways, such as working with parents, siblings or other relatives on a farm or in a family trade or business. Preparing for college is really a luxury, and often not one that is highly prized by the rest of the family. This ability to contribute to the family’s economic viability is seen as a major emblem of maturity in working class families, and “markers” of maturity often relate to the kind of work a boy can perform rather than academic advancement. Driving the tractor during haying season, using a log skidder for the first time, or working with a parent or other relative as a helper in a trade often signals the beginning of productive work and, simultaneously, preliminary entry into the adult world. As a status symbol, school achievement becomes increasingly irrelevant in this community and family context.

Economic independence for many boys from non-college family environments does not consider career trajectories, but the ability to meet short term needs: owning and operating a car, not relying on parents for spending money (and, therefore, being more “independent”), or being able to buy presents for girlfriends or family members. More basic forms of sustenance may not enter into consideration, because many children live in generational poverty and are accustomed to various forms of public assistance. (For girls, economic independence usually means not being dependent on a man, so post-secondary education is more likely to be seen as a means to that end.)

Among poor kids, home ownership is not necessarily seen as a desirable goal if their family, and their community at large, has always rented from others. In fact, in some families the ability to “move quickly” and “not be tied down” by property ownership is seen as a desirable state of affairs. Being able to follow a harvest or relocate to find work is a long-established tradition among various elements of the U.S. working class, and this particular strategy for economic survival becomes the norm for children in these families. (Also, frequent moves mitigate against

school success and achievement, so the link between school and economic attainment is weakened even further.)

Among poor and working class boys, a “man’s work” is not usually associated with intellectual activity, and is almost never connected with the school’s academic program. The definition of a “good job” for many non-college-bound youth is focused on the amount of steady pay relative to others in the family or when compared to other, perhaps menial, jobs the boy has held. More ephemeral criteria – such as benefits, social contribution, satisfaction, or career advancement – may not enter into the equation at all.

In many working class communities, successful people are not necessarily well-educated. It’s tough to counter an argument like this one: “Uncle Harry has a good welding business, and he didn’t go to college...and he makes more than my teachers do.” Ironically, teachers often reinforce this position – and undermine efforts to promote post-secondary education among their students -- by pointing out that any number of skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled workers actually earn more than they do. As a result, many young people see success as being linked to hard work, “street smarts,” entrepreneurship, and luck as much as it is the result of education.

Even among students who seek some kind of post-secondary training or education, their limited knowledge of the complexities of application, admission, and financial aid may discourage their aspirations. Poor kids, especially boys, grossly over-estimate the cost of college and are somewhat more likely than girls to state that “I can’t afford it.” Generally, this point of view mimics that of their families and others in their communities, especially since the news is full of stories about the enormous costs of higher education, the huge debt load that many students carry, and the challenge that even well-educated people face in finding jobs in this slack economy. Much less frequent are stories about post-secondary affordability, and those usually appear in outlets that are aimed at people already interested in going to college and who are just seeking additional information.

In the past 10-15 years, the military, historically a place for high-quality technical training and education, has become less of an option for young men from non-college families. A poor economy has driven more able students to enlist, so those with less-than-stellar academic records often have even fewer options in a military system that has been on a war footing for more than a decade.

### School Effects<sup>1</sup>

Schools can have a tremendous effect on boys’ college aspirations, both positive and negative. Some of the impediments are organizational and institutional, others are personal and idiosyncratic. Two of the most challenging variables are the nature of college-going programs themselves and the attitudes of school personnel (often expressed quite unintentionally and in subtle ways).

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<sup>1</sup> The school performance differences between girls and boys have been well-documented in research and have been presented in some detail in the companion paper to this essay. Therefore, this section will not repeat that discussion but will focus on college aspirations in particular.

Preparation programs tend to focus on college attendance in particular rather than post-secondary education more generally. However, boys are somewhat more likely to see the advantages of vocational preparation, even if it is the result of a 4-year college degree, rather than more generic college studies. So while boys are more attracted to the idea of studying something specific – welding, auto mechanics, agriculture, computer technology, or engineering – girls are somewhat more likely to be motivated by the promise of college attendance itself. Even prior to the undergraduate years, girls are also slightly more likely to express the need for and personal interest in attending graduate school. Boys are more inclined to say that they want to go right to work after college.

School personnel are also less likely to promote the idea of college attendance among boys than girls, especially for poor and minority boys. School achievement, generally lower for poor and minority boys, also reinforces the notion that schooling is something to be ended as soon as possible – and avoided in the future. School personnel are certainly justified in recommending against college attendance for kids who are failing in high school, but the combination of poor performance and advice that discourages post-secondary attendance comprises a very powerful anti-college message for young men.

Further, many school staff members are poorly informed about post-secondary options other than college, or the kinds of technical education that might be appropriate for and beneficial to boys who struggle with more abstract, academic content. They also tend to over-estimate the importance of their particular subject (e.g., English, math, history) as a significant pre-requisite for success in technically-oriented post-secondary education fields. As a result, they may give very well-intentioned advice that is not entirely accurate and may actually discourage students from aspiring to fields of post-secondary education in which they might do well.

Even attractive, educated role models in the school (e.g., coaches) may not focus their conversations with students on college-going except as it relates to the sport the boy is playing. So the conversation may be about whether a boy is good enough to get on a college team, not the more available options for athletic participation (e.g., intramural sports), sports-related careers, or the generalized benefits of college attendance. In short, despite their close relationship with the boys on their teams, they may not use that relationship as a vehicle for promoting post-secondary education as part of a career trajectory.

### What Works

Despite this rather grim analysis, there are strategies and programs that do increase boys' aspirations for and admission to post-secondary education. But the most important conclusion about programs is this: no single strategy is effective, by itself, for promoting boys' college attendance; the most successful programs are ones that combine as many of these research-based strategies as possible.

- **Mentorships.** Carefully constructed, interest-based mentorship opportunities, especially in the context of raising career aspirations, help boys form the notion that “post-secondary education is for me.” Mentors can help boys shape realistic expectations,



understand the need for pre-requisite learning, and advise on college application and admissions. In some communities, where face-to-face mentorships may not be practical, electronic mentorships have shown some promise. (In one Florida school, students are matched with research scientists – one of whom is at an Antarctic research station and communicates with his mentee via the Internet.)

- **Internships.** Work experiences that make use of intellectual, academic, and modern workplace skills give boys the opportunity to experience “intellectual” or professional rather than physical work. Because of limited opportunities in many communities, the school may actually be the best place to provide these kinds of experiences. In one community, a “teacher aide” program employs students to work with teachers in preparing lessons, setting up labs, or managing computer technology. Students are paid a small stipend, and they get to see a more complete view of teaching as a potential profession.
- **Early Interventions.** Launching a college-readiness program early (middle school or before) helps to build motivation, correct skill deficiencies and keep boys on track to graduate with their peers. (Grade retention is deadly: being retained for one year after the second grade increases the likelihood of dropping out to better than 50%; a second retention virtually guarantees the student will drop out of school.) In addition to academic supports, one elementary school has upper grade students pick a college and “follow” it through the year – including its academic programs, admission requirements, athletic and cultural events – all via the Internet. They also provide the kids with spirit wear and other emblems of the institution. Graduates from the elementary school who have gone on to college also come in to talk with students about their experiences in higher education.
- **College Awareness.** Raising awareness for both students and their parents is critical for building aspirations, especially if the message comes from an attractive role model. But role models are very context-bound; an NBA star may not be as attractive to kids in a rural community as a celebrity hunting and fishing guide, and that guide may have no pull in an urban community. For parents, it is important that they hear from other parents *like themselves* that college is attainable, affordable and necessary for their children. When people discuss college costs, the size of the numbers tossed around are intimidating for even moderately affluent families. For poor or poorly educated parents, they can be paralyzing. All discussions of cost should also include information about resources to support students who wish to get a post-secondary education.
- **College-Going Culture.** A comprehensive school culture that supports college attendance helps build aspirations and increase admission and success for boys. This kind of environment addresses both the big issues (finances, academic preparation, admission) and the subtle messages that are given to students every day by virtually every staff member about their ability to succeed in a post-secondary setting.
- **Comprehensive Programs.** Programs that treat college preparation and admission as a multi-faceted issue are more successful than those that focus on a single factor or

variable. Two of the most prominent are GEAR UP, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and funded by the USDOE and other partners, and AVID, a non-profit organization whose programs are funded by state and district grants. Both have long histories of promoting college awareness, readiness and attendance among poor, minority youth in both rural and urban settings. GEAR UP programs are unique because each program, while focused on research-based core variables associated with success, is tailored to the local community and schools, so it becomes integrated into the normal activities of the school. AVID follows a somewhat more prescribed approach, and is actually treated as a separate “class.” Both have strong records of accomplishment. Other comprehensive programs (such as New York City’s “Beating the Odds (BTO)” high schools) use core strategies similar to those in GEAR UP and AVID, but usually with specialized, local funding sources. (For a report on BTO high schools, see [http://www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2011/documents/Beating\\_the\\_odds\\_report.pdf](http://www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2011/documents/Beating_the_odds_report.pdf)).

### The Bottom Line

Programs to promote college attendance for boys can work. They need to start early, be continuous, and address all of the issues and challenges that mitigate against post-secondary attainment. Also, they must be inclusive, focused not just on the student, but on the family, community, and school culture in which these students live and work. Finally, they need to be customized to fit local circumstances and needs so that they are integrated into the norms and routines of the school and its community. Simple, “bolt on” programs seldom work well, and are very difficult to sustain. Ultimately, the goal of all college preparation programs is to create a sustainable school and community culture that supports high education aspirations and the likelihood of success for every student.



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