

Perceptions of Higher Education: Gender Differences in Utah Secondary School Students

According to 2020 US Census data, 20.6% of females 25 years or older have earned a bachelor’s degree, compared to 19.8% of men.¹ Within the same age group in Utah, females show the same pattern: 23.4% have earned a bachelor’s compared to 22.6% of males. Although statistics show gains in female educational attainment, females in Utah are more likely to have participated in some college with no degree (26.2%) or have an associate degree (11.1%), compared to males in Utah (24.9% and 8.8%, respectively). Additionally, although national rates show more females (13.0%) than males (12.4%) have earned graduate or professional degrees, Utah females (9.3%) have earned them at significantly lower rates than Utah males (14.1%). Utah females can be financially disadvantaged by not completing a degree or by not pursuing an advanced degree.² Thus, it is critical to understand and address gender-related educational disparities.

A recent Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) [brief](#) referenced these statistics and reported data about how Utah women enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs perceive higher education.³ It is also important to gauge how Utah youth perceive higher education and what barriers they encounter when deciding whether to go to college. This research brief reports data from an Envision Utah survey of secondary students. Our purpose is to determine what, if any, differences exist between male and female responses. We also compare the results with national data and review applicable literature. Finally, we offer recommendations that could help mitigate barriers that Utah’s secondary students experience, prepare them more effectively for higher education, and increase their graduation rates.

Setting the Stage

Envision Utah is a nonprofit organization founded in 1997 with the purpose of engaging “Utahns in collaborative, bottom-up decision making” and is focused on helping Utah maintain a high quality of life as the population grows.⁴ Envision Utah works on a variety of issues related to quality of life, including education. From October 2020 through February 2021, Envision Utah conducted a survey of secondary students over age 13. The survey asked more than 100 questions; this brief focuses on questions that asked students about their plans after high school, factors that affect educational decisions, and barriers to pursuing higher education. Using a combination of convenience recruitment strategies, 7,659 responses were recorded.⁵ After applying eligibility criteria,⁶ data from 6,018 participants were used in the analytic sample. Participant demographics are shown in Table 1. The sample

was 62.9% female, primarily in 9th–12th grades, and predominately White. Using various statistical tests, we analyzed the data for gender differences; in tables and figures, “*” denotes a statistically significant difference.⁷ Although the data have limitations,⁸ the results offer important insights about how female secondary students have different experiences and educational plans from those of male students.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

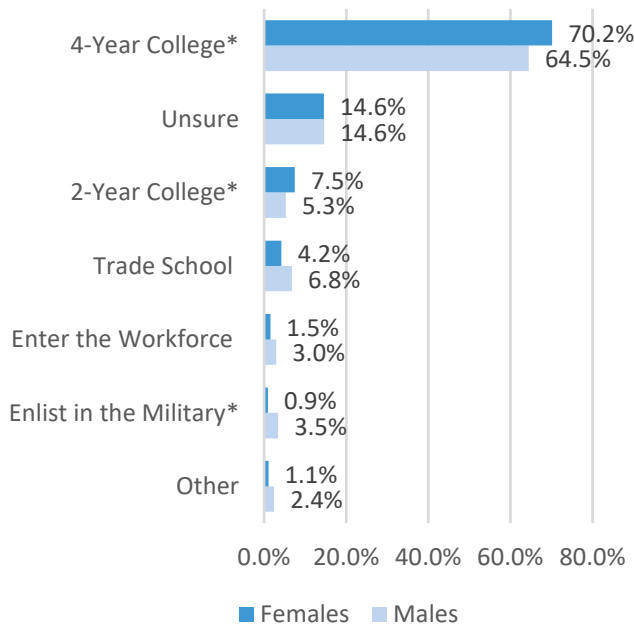
Category	Female	Male	Total	% Female
Grade				
8th	371	239	610	60.8%
9th	706	513	1,219	57.9%
10th	877	505	1,382	63.5%
11th	839	437	1,276	65.8%
12th	996	535	1,531	65.1%
Race				
White	1,879	1,132	3,011	62.4%
Latinx	344	209	553	62.2%
Asian	127	92	219	58.0%
Black	42	23	65	64.6%
Native American	34	26	60	56.7%
Middle Eastern	32	29	61	52.5%
Other Race/ Ethnicity	394	203	597	66.0%
Not Indicated ⁹	937	515	1,452	64.5%
Total	3789	2229	6,018	62.9%

More Females Plan to Attend College

National research has shown that females are more likely to plan on attending college.¹⁰ The Envision Utah data suggest that Utah females in secondary school are similarly ambitious when asked about college plans. Figure 1 shows postsecondary plans by gender.¹¹ In the sample, more females indicated they plan to attend either a two-year or a four-year college or university. More males indicated they plan to enlist in the military; they also tended to select going to trade school or entering the workforce more than females. Female and male students responded at similar rates to “unsure.”¹² Those who selected “other” mentioned plans such as going on a religious mission or pursuing more than one of the options listed. Combined, more females have postsecondary educational plans (81.9%) than males (76.6%). However, as outlined earlier, more Utah women are leaving college without a degree or finishing with an associate degree, and fewer women are earning advanced degrees. Put another way, of Utah residents older

than 18, there are about 25,000 more males than females who have a bachelor’s degree or higher.¹³ Thus, although female secondary students plan on attending college at higher rates than male students, they are less likely to translate these ambitions into college graduation.

Figure 1: Postsecondary Plans by Gender¹⁴



Females Perceive Barriers as More Significant

The Envision Utah data offer insight into why fewer secondary students graduate from college than plan to attend, and why the disparity is larger for females. When asked what they see as the most significant barriers to attending college for themselves or others, females and males responded in statistically different ways. The results indicate females perceived each potential barrier as more significant than did the males. Except for lack of interest in attending college, these differences were statistically significant. Figure 2 outlines these differences. The following two sections discuss the types of perceived barriers in greater detail.

Resource Barriers

Responding to the barriers question, Utah female secondary students were concerned about lack of external resources, such as money, information, and time. Although both females and males were most concerned with the costs associated with attending college (i.e., “costs” had the highest average rating followed by “student loans”), females in the study had a statistically significant higher level of concern.

Interestingly, female survey respondents were less comfortable with debt than the males. For example, 41.7% of male respondents were comfortable with \$5,000 or more in student

debt, compared to about one-third (34.5%) of female respondents. In Utah, college is generally affordable and has the least expensive public four-year colleges.¹⁵ Utahns also have the lowest average student debt of all 50 states (\$18,344 in Utah¹⁶ compared to \$29,950 nationally).¹⁷ Nationally, however, women are more likely to hold student loan debt than males.¹⁸

Figure 2: Perceived Barriers to College by Gender from Least (1) to Most (7) Significant



Females in the study also believed that female college graduates, on average, earn less. More than half (52.9%) of the males indicated that they believed earning a bachelor’s degree will lead to an annual increase of \$20,000 or more compared to someone with a high school diploma in Utah, while only 44.9% of females believed this to be true. For national context, men with bachelor’s degrees earn on average \$29,600 more per year than men with only high school diplomas compared to a difference of only \$24,100 for women.¹⁹

Although it is well established that more education leads to higher average annual salaries, there is a significant difference between the pay of men and women, commonly referred to as the gender wage gap. On average, women across the United States earn 83.0 cents for every dollar that men earn.²⁰ Utah women experience one of the country's largest wage gaps, earning about 69.8 cents for every dollar that men earn.²¹ The cost of college may be especially problematic for women because they receive a lower return on investment (ROI) for attending college.²² Lower pay after graduation means they may struggle more to pay off student loan debt incurred during college. Female students in this study also rated the possibility of finding a good job without further education as a more significant barrier to pursuing higher education than male students, a long-term ROI consideration.

Another resource that females seemed more affected by was lack of information. For example, female students rated the lack of information about how to apply to college as a more significant barrier than male students. When asked how strongly they agree with the statement "I know how to navigate the process of applying for college or financial aid, or I know how to find the help I need," female students responded with a mean of 3.1 compared to a mean of 3.4 for male students. On a 5-point scale where high values reflect greater understanding, this finding is suboptimal and indicates that many of Utah's secondary students feel uninformed. While impacting all students, the small but significant average differences between females and males indicate that lack of information about how to apply for college or financial aid is a greater concern for females.

Along with the perceived lack of information, female students cited lack of time as a more significant barrier to attending college. Several barriers listed in the Envision Utah study fall under this category: the lack of time/flexibility to attend classes, the long-term commitment required for college, and the need to work because of family responsibilities. A recent UWLP brief about perceptions of higher education among female college and graduate students cites evidence that women heavily consider the impact of family on work and education goals.²³ This report corroborates that finding and suggests that female students are starting to think about how to balance multiple responsibilities at an even younger age.

In sum, Utah's female secondary students perceived access to resources—including financing, information, and time—as more significant barriers to college than did male students. These represent external barriers. The next section discusses internal barriers that affect female secondary students to a greater degree than male students.

Self-Efficacy & Mental Health Barriers

Self-efficacy "refers to the strength of your belief in your ability to achieve goals."²⁴ In other words, individuals with higher self-efficacy are internally confident that they can take on a task and do well. Research about self-efficacy in high school females suggests that students' beliefs about their competence are impacted by many factors²⁵ and that females

have, on average, lower self-efficacy than males.²⁶ Responses to the barrier survey question suggest that this holds true for Utah secondary students. Specifically, female students rated being fearful about a new environment as a more significant barrier than male students, and they also saw standardized tests as a greater barrier. Other survey questions also reflected self-efficacy barriers. Although female and male students felt that they would do relatively well if they attended a four-year college/university after high school,²⁷ female students were less likely than males to agree with the statement, "I feel prepared for college (or believe I will feel prepared by the time I finish high school)."²⁸ In sum, although more female students plan to attend college than male students, they feel less prepared and are worried about new challenges.

Mental health is a related internal factor. Female survey respondents rated their mental health as a more significant barrier to going to college, and, in fact, this barrier had the largest gender difference. Of note is that the Envision Utah survey was administered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were asked how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their education, and female students reported being more adversely affected. Compared to the base outcome of no disruption, females were more likely than males to respond that the pandemic had disrupted their education but it is now back on track (1.6 higher odds for females), the pandemic had disrupted their education and they are confident it will get back on track eventually (1.6 higher odds for females), or that the pandemic had disrupted their education and they are not sure it will ever get back on track (1.8 higher odds for females).²⁹ Nationally, research shows that female students' mental health was more adversely affected by the pandemic, with nearly half (49%) of high school girls indicating that their mental health was poor during the pandemic, compared with about a quarter of boys (24%).³⁰ These Utah-specific and national results should cause concern because poor mental health may negatively impact female students' likelihood of pursuing higher education and engaging in the workforce.

Compared to male students, female students also showed greater concern about belonging, rating both fear of a new environment (reported previously) and lack of diversity as more significant barriers to attending college. Female students may be concerned about how they will fit and be accepted into the higher education community. However, another question about whether college environments are welcoming showed no significant gender differences. Although diversity was not defined in the survey, it typically refers to increasing the proportion of females and other underrepresented individuals within a larger group. Research suggests that representation matters, and increasing diversity on Utah's college campuses may make it more likely that females,³¹ people of color,³² and sexual minority³³ students attend and graduate from college.

Looking at the findings from the study more broadly, Utah's female students rated every barrier listed in the Envision Utah survey as more significant and weighed almost all survey topics more heavily than male students. For instance, when asked to rate the importance of expected high school outcomes—

such as learning career skills and developing soft skills—girls consistently rated the outcomes as more important. The exception was making friends, which males students rated as more important than female students. This pattern was true of other questions in the survey, including the influence of various factors when deciding what to do after high school, the importance of expected higher education outcomes, and the importance of factors when choosing where to live. The exceptions were that male students rated the following as having a greater influence on post-high-school decisions than female students: how much money they wanted to make in a career, what friends were doing, and what siblings did after high school. Although these gender differences were often small, they suggest a trend of female students experiencing heightened concern about life. This is consistent with research about females and worry: girls on average are more worried than boys are.³⁴ Given these findings, it is important to consider how differing perceptions and worry levels may contribute to how secondary students make decisions about higher education and their subsequent effects on college graduation rates.

Support for Solutions

The Envision Utah survey listed possible solutions to college barriers and asked students to rate their effectiveness. Table 2 lists each solution in order of highest to lowest support.

Table 2: Possible Solutions to College Barriers Rated from Least (1) to Most Effective (7)

Solution Description	Female Mean	Male Mean	p - value
Provide more resources and information about paying for college	5.8	5.3	<0.00*
Provide better info about applying to college	5.7	5.3	<0.00*
Eliminate tuition for two- or four-year colleges	5.3	4.8	<0.00*
Automatically submit application to state colleges for all high school students	4.7	4.3	<0.00*
Advertise trade schools or two-year colleges better	4.5	4.4	0.15
Shorten bachelor’s degree programs to less than four years	4.3	3.9	<0.00*
Automatically enroll students in a college success course	3.9	3.6	<0.00*
Automatically enroll students in college when they graduate high school	3.4	3.2	0.01*

In all cases, females rated solutions as more effective than males; the differences were statistically significant in every case except advertising trade schools and two-year colleges

more effectively. Given that the highest-rated barriers to attending college were the cost and associated student loans, it makes sense that highly rated solutions addressed paying for college. Although students rated free tuition highly, what they rated even higher was access to better information. Females rated getting more information and resources about paying for college the highest, followed by more information about the application process, while males rated these two solutions equally. Advertising trade schools and two-year colleges better was rated more highly than shortened bachelor’s programs. The solution of automatically submitting applications to state colleges for all students was rated higher than automatically enrolling students into college itself or into a college success course once they begin.

Summary & Recommendations

Results from the Envision Utah study show that the perceptions and plans of Utah’s female and male secondary students differ in statistically significant ways. In this section, we summarize key findings and recommend several strategies that may effectively reduce perceived barriers to college.

First, female students are more worried about the costs of attending college. Given that female students face a lower return on investment after earning a bachelor’s degree, they would benefit from additional financial support when pursuing higher education. Female students could receive financial support through expanded state-sponsored scholarship programs as well as through private businesses within Utah’s robust economy. However, because the financial landscape of higher education is complex, helping female students cover the costs of higher education will require creative solutions at individual, college/university, state, and national levels. At broader levels, solutions may include greater transparency about costs and loans, incentivizing lower tuition, and decreasing costs through technology innovations, to name a few.³⁵ Long-term changes in Utah—closing the gender wage gap, for example—necessitates that more Utah girls and women earn college and advanced degrees. Mitigating the cost could enable more women to attend and graduate.

Second, female students, more than male students, feel as if they lack information about college. Improving the ways that secondary schools provide information about applying for, financing, and succeeding in higher education will require more local efforts, many of which can be implemented in cost-effective ways (e.g., application workshops, online resources, career fairs). These efforts should build on and expand the important work of Utah’s school counselors. Part of the solution may be better messaging about existing resources, such as [Utah Career Pathways](#), including [Concurrent Enrollment](#) courses, and low-cost preparation resources such as the University of Utah’s [Prepare for College](#) page and [College On-Ramp Class](#).³⁶ Female students indicated that not knowing what to study is a significant barrier to attending college.

More schools should adopt [College and Career Awareness](#) courses and create follow-up units in later classes. Encouraging females to job shadow or conduct informational interviews with a variety of professionals could help inform and motivate their higher education decisions. Not all of Utah's students have access to college-educated professionals in their personal networks so schools may need to provide stronger support to lower income and minority students (as one resource, see [Keys to Success](#)). Still, educators and mentors should help students understand that they do not need to decide on a major or career while in high school; those decisions can come naturally during general education courses. Because female students may find the time commitment and lack of flexibility as barriers to college, awareness of accelerated programs—such as Southern Utah University's [3-year bachelor's degrees](#)—may help some students plan for higher education more effectively. Combining existing and new strategies will help address college information deficits.

Third, Utah's communities, schools, and colleges should devote more resources to improving students' self-efficacy and mental health. Self-efficacy is an important topic in education, and Utah should be at the forefront of adapting new teaching curriculum and practices as they emerge from scholarship.³⁷ Also, mental health is a growing challenge among Utah youth.³⁸ Female students in this study felt greater concern about mental health being a barrier to their higher education than male students. Although interventions such as the [SafeUT](#) app and the new [988 hotline](#) help students in crisis, school districts need additional funding for onsite mental health professionals and mental health literacy initiatives (such as the [School-based Mental Health Qualified Grant Program](#), [School-based Mental Health Screening Grant](#), and the [Project Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education Grant](#)). Added efforts will help meet the goals set forth by the Utah State Board of Education [Health and Wellness Policy](#) and ensure students learn to implement healthy habits and coping skills that strengthen their well-being.

Fourth, Utah's colleges should increase diversity on their campuses within student populations, faculty, and staff. The benefits of diversity in higher education³⁹ and workplaces⁴⁰

are well documented. As Utah colleges and universities develop these efforts (e.g., Utah Valley University's [Inclusion Plan](#)), they can use [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources developed by the Utah System of Higher Education. It is necessary that colleges and universities evaluate their initiatives to test whether programmatic changes impact individual-level experiences. Prioritizing diversity on Utah's campuses could especially benefit female students (and male students) who are also racial or sexual minorities.

Finally, Utah should consider adopting policies that encourage more students to attend college by removing the burden of the application and enrollment process. Other states (e.g., Idaho, Colorado, and Arizona) have explored automatic enrollment strategies and provide examples of policy and implementation strategies.⁴¹ Many automatic enrollment programs, either instituted by states or individual universities, are focused on admitting high-achieving high school students (e.g., Texas' [Automatic College Admission](#)). Universities and colleges in Utah should consider expanding this practice to include automatic admission of high school graduates into one of the states' open enrollment universities.

Conclusion

Results from the recent Envision Utah study of secondary students show gender differences in the educational experiences and aspirations of Utah's youth. By drawing attention to these differences, we urge Utah policy makers and educators at all levels to seriously consider what female students perceive to be significant barriers to attending college, and how these barriers might contribute to gender gaps in graduation rates (e.g., leaving college without a degree, not pursuing advanced degrees). We call on educational administrators and all community leaders to address cost as a barrier to college and to engage in further dialogue about proposed solutions. Further, we encourage more initiatives that focus on providing information to students, improving mental health, and increasing diversity and belonging. In our efforts to close gender gaps in higher education, most—if not all—solutions will mutually benefit all secondary students as they pursue higher education and better their futures.

¹ United States Census Bureau. (2020). *Educational attainment: American Community Survey 5-year estimates*. https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=Educational%20Attainment&g=0100000US_0400000US49&tid=ACSSST5Y2020.S1501

² Winkel, R., Darowski, E. S., Christensen, M., & Madsen, S. R. (2021). *Utah gender wage gap: A 2021 update*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/snapshot/31.pdf>

³ Lim, S., Wright, C., & Darowski, E. S. (2022). *Understanding the gender gap in Utah higher education: Quantitative findings*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/45-understanding-gender-gap-utah-higher-education.pdf>

⁴ Envision Utah. (2022). *Our story*. <https://envisionutah.org/about>

⁵ The sample, although large, is a convenience sample, and may not be representative of the actual secondary school population in Utah.

⁶ Participants ($n = 1,641$) were not included in the analytic sample if they did not identify as male/female, did not live in Utah, were under 13 years old, were not in 8th–12th grade, did not respond to eligibility

questions, or did not respond to at least one question used in our analysis. This constituted 21.4% of the sample. Additionally, there may be duplicate responses in the data. However, when attempts were made to eliminate duplicates by matching responses, significant findings did not change.

⁷ Statistical tests depended on the nature of the question/variable and included t-tests, ordered logistic models, and multinomial logistic models. We used a p -value of .05 as our threshold for statistical significance. We examined Cohen's d effect sizes on questions with multiple comparisons. Significant differences showed small effects sizes (0.1 to 0.4). The overall trend suggests narrow but consistent differences between the perceptions of female and male secondary students.

⁸ In addition to generalizability limitations, the data are missing religion as a key demographic characteristic.

⁹ Because race was not an eligibility question, we included participants who did not indicate their race. As such, the demographic snapshot is incomplete.

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- ¹¹ Important note: the question asked about plans after high school regardless of any planned gap time for travel or church mission service.
- ¹² Some statistically significant findings differ between our analyses and Envision Utah's because of the way we selected our analytic samples.
- ¹³ United States Census Bureau. (2020).
- ¹⁴ Gender differences were examined using a multinomial logistic regression where "enter the work force" was used as the base outcome. A "*" indicates that compared to the base outcome, females were more likely than males to select two-year or four-year college, and males were more likely than females to select enlist in the military.
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- ²² McGurran, B. (2022).
- ²³ Lim, S., Wright, C., & Darowski, E. S. (2022).
- ²⁴ Whitener, S. (2017, December 6). *How self-efficacy changes your self-confidence*. Forbes Leadership. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/12/06/how-self-efficacy-changes-your-self-confidence/?sh=506460545ff7>
- ²⁵ Brown, C. S. (2019). Sexualized gender stereotypes predict girls' academic self-efficacy and motivation across middle school. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 43(6), 523–529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016502541986236>
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- ²⁷ The mean for female and male respondents was 4.2 (from 1-definitely yes to 5-definitely no).
- ²⁸ The mean for female respondents was 3.7 compared with 4.0 for males (from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree).
- ²⁹ Differences were calculated using an ordered logistic model with no disruption as the base or comparison outcome.
- ³⁰ Schaeffer, K. (2022, April 25). *In CDC survey, 37% of U.S. high school students report regular mental health struggles during COVID-*
- ¹⁹ Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/04/25/in-cdc-survey-37-of-u-s-high-school-students-report-regular-mental-health-struggles-during-covid-19/>
- ³¹ Bettinger, E., & Long, B. L. (2005). Do faculty serve as role models? The impact of instructor gender on female students. *The American Economic Review*, 95(2), 152–157. <https://doi.org/10.1257/000282805774670149>
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