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Editorial

Close the growing college gender gap

The Detroit News

America's young men are increasingly becoming an endangered species when it comes to college achievement. Michigan should be among the country's pioneers in tackling this problem while simultaneously boosting its talent pool and economic potential.

The growing gender gap in college attendance is rooted in girls' and boys' K-12 achievement differences, researchers say. Now, new evidence shows that boys' high school dropout rate is a crucial contributor, as well.

After peaking in 1970, America's high school graduation rate has been stagnant or declining ever since. The problem has been especially severe among male students.

The gender difference in high school dropout rates accounts for roughly half of the emerging gender gap in college attendance, according to a new paper written by Nobel Prize winner James J.

Heckman, a University of Chicago professor of economics, and Paul A. LaFontaine, a researcher at the American Bar Foundation's Center for Social Program Evaluation.

The causes of the gender gap in student achievement are complex. Changes in the educational landscape -- and in boys themselves -- are affecting boys' achievement.

For one, male teachers have become more rare. As men have found other careers more lucrative than teaching, schools have a tougher time recruiting men. Without school role models, boys increasingly view academic learning as feminine, which naturally they don't want to be, experts say.

There are methods besides affirmative action -- rejected by the voters -- to make school, and ultimately college, more welcoming to boys. Among them: Fashioning school days around the needs of boys, including physical activities to balance desk-based learning. As school budgets shrink and global competition requires more demanding curriculums and learning from students, recesses have been less commonplace.

Teachers also need to rethink how they teach boys, whose language abilities develop more slowly than girls. Students who have strong language skills tend to do better in tests -- and thus, boys are less likely to excel.

School districts and the state also need to examine the needs of young men to help them stay in high school. Male students struggle more with impulsive behavior and long-term thinking, experts say.

Thus, studying for a long-term payoff -- a college degree some eight years away -- is tougher for some boys than it is for girls. So schools should invest in short-term incentives to keep young men in school.

And the nation needs to rethink its emphasis on desk-based jobs in which some young men lack interest. High-tech trades and job creation are needed for the millions of men who lack an aptitude or passion for sedentary work.

Like other states, Michigan also needs to carefully consider the role of imprisonment for young black men.

"Whether the increased incarceration is the result of bad schooling, or whether it's the result of

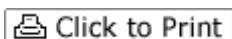
changes in crime policy that lead to lower graduation rates, is yet to be untangled," Lawrence R. Mishel, a leading researcher on dropouts, recently told the Chronicle of Higher Education. "You can't just blame schools. Is this something going on with schools, or is it something going on with criminal-justice policy?"

Lastly, parents need to push their sons to stay in school and make it clear how detrimental dropping out is to their future success. Girls, experts say, have bought in to the idea that school and college success are essential to supporting their families someday. And since the 1970s, girls have responded by dedicating themselves to working harder at school, evidence shows.

But that hasn't been the case with boys. That change must come from the grass-roots level up.

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