



## The Men Are Back

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For the first time in many years, a number of community colleges are reporting that their enrollment of male students this past fall either outpaced or equaled that of female students.

Tidewater Community College, in Virginia, saw a 16 percent increase in the enrollment of male students this past fall compared to fall 2008. During the same time period, female enrollment grew by 11.5 percent. Still, women are 61 percent of the college's overall enrollment and men 39 percent.

"This is the first time in a very, very long time that male growth outpaced female growth," said Deborah M. DiCroce, Tidewater's president. "I think that there is no way to separate what we're looking at here from the realities of the economy. This is clearly the reversal of a trend we've seen for years."

A demographic analysis shows that a large percentage of the new male students at Tidewater are over the age of 30, non-white, enrolled full-time and in career/technology programs. The individual associate degree programs that have seen the largest growth of male students include those to become a respiratory therapist and physical therapist assistant, two programs which have had a predominantly female enrollment in recent years. Still, programs that have traditionally had strong male enrollment, such as automotive technology and administration of justice, have also had double digit percentage growths in male students.

Lisa Kleiman, director of institutional effectiveness at Tidewater, said she believes the new GI Bill is a major contributing factor to the increase of male students this past fall, given the large number of active-duty and retired military personnel in the college's service area.

Last semester, the college had more than 1,300 students who received benefits from the new GI Bill, and 62 percent of them were male -- in stark contrast to the college's student body as a whole, which is 39 percent male. A demographic analysis of GI Bill students at Tidewater shows that these students closer mirror the newly enrolled male students, as they are also predominately older than 30 and enrolled full time.

Both DiCroce and Kleiman suspected that the recent job losses in the Tidewater region of Virginia, including those at shipbuilding plants and trucking companies, may have disproportionately affected males. In addition, both said they expect the growth of male students to continue into the foreseeable future.

Other community colleges reported even more dramatic growths in male students.

Randolph Community College, in North Carolina, reported that its first-time, full-time male enrollment increased by 68 percent from fall 2008 to fall 2009. Its overall enrollment increased by 15 percent during the same time period. Now, males are 37 percent of the overall enrollment and females are 63 percent.

"Males have been lagging behind (in numbers and success) in education for quite a few years," wrote Karen Ritter, director of planning and assessment at the college, in an e-mail. "I suspect it's hard for them to find jobs, and they are finally seeing the benefit of higher education. Simply being male no longer gives them a leg up in the job market!"

Still, Randolph officials noted that some of the male enrollment growth could also be attributed to a brand-new training center opened at the college last summer. In July, Randolph unveiled the Richard Petty Education Center. The facility, named after the legendary stock car driver, houses the college's automotive systems technology and auto body repair programs.

Across the country, in Washington, Lower Columbia College had a similarly dramatic growth in the number of male students last fall. The enrollment of first-time, full-time male students grew by 36 percent from fall 2008. College officials noted that this percentage increase is nearly double the overall increase in student enrollment during the same time period. Now, the college is 62 percent female and 38 percent male. College officials believe this growth is a response to changing economic realities in their rural service area.

"Longview has experienced some of the highest unemployment in our state (and nationally) due to downturns in the timber, construction and paper mill industries," wrote Sue Groth, college spokeswoman, in an e-mail. "Even before the current economic downturn, [the college] has focused extra effort on recruiting young adult male students. We know that jobs of the future (and even the present) are requiring training beyond high school. For many years, this was not the case in mill towns such as ours. But, the changing economy is requiring those working in manufacturing to have college level skills."

Some of the other community colleges reporting that male enrollment growth either outpaced or equaled female increases from fall 2008 to fall 2009 were Spokane Community, which reported a 28 percent increase and Spokane Falls Community College, which reported a 31 percent increase. Seminole State College of Florida also reported a 6.3 percent increase in males from fall 2007 to fall 2008, a rate that outpaced its female student growth.

### **The National Picture**

No national data exist yet on community college enrollment from last semester, by gender, but estimated data suggest some small shifts.

Kent Phillippe, director of research at the American Association of Community Colleges, noted that one of the group's recent studies showed that the number of male students at two-year institutions has grown by 0.5 percent since the fall of 2007, from 41.7 percent of the overall enrollment to 42.9 percent in the fall of 2009. During those two years, the overall enrollment increase was nearly 17 percent. These fall 2009 enrollment figures have been estimated by AACC researchers based on intermediate data collection.

"Overall, there's a growth, and the growth is slightly bigger for males, proportionally, than for females," Phillippe said. "You're not getting a higher number of males relative to females in percentage change, but what you are seeing is the ratio closing. So, the increase of males has occurred faster than the increase in females. It's a subtle thing to grasp."

Phillippe was unsure to what extent these numbers may reflect a major enrollment shift at community colleges.

"I've heard reports saying that current unemployment is hurting males more than females, so it's not surprising that some would note major male increases," Phillippe said. "There's a relationship between education and the economy. To what extent this may be a one-time thing or a larger change in male enrollments, I'm not sure."

— **David Moltz**