



BRAVE NEW WORLD

By Cati O'Keefe

As the number of minority women in the United States swells over the next few decades, the face of education will change profoundly, creating exciting opportunities for leaders in higher education.

Since the turn of the last century, AAUW has had the mission of ensuring equitable access to education for all women and girls. As an organization, AAUW put its collective heart into achieving educational parity for women and roundly succeeded, almost to the extent that say some it has done itself out of a job.

"Today women outnumber men in most areas of postsecondary education, and the gap is even more pronounced among many non-white minority groups," states Dr. Jesse H. Lytle, coordinator of Women's Education Worldwide, based at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass. And the numbers back that up: According to the American Council on Education report *College*

Students Today: A National Portrait, 2005, women represent 58 percent of undergraduate enrollment.

While the numbers of White women graduating from high school and attending four-year colleges are high, the same can't be said for minority women, whose numbers, though growing, lag.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of White females over 25 who have completed high school is 86.3 percent. For African Americans, the number is 80.8 percent, and 59.5 percent for Hispanics. The Bureau also shows that the percentage of White females over 25 who have completed four years of college is 26.4 percent, ver-

sus 18.5 percent of African Americans and 12.3 percent of Hispanics.

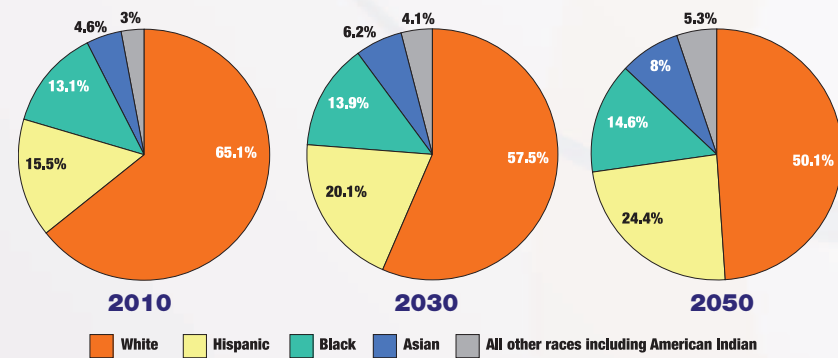
Combine these stats with the growth rate of minorities through the next few decades, and you'll get a snapshot of the enormous effort that needs to be expended on behalf of this burgeoning demographic of Americans.

Today, one of three U.S. residents is part of a group other than single-race non-Hispanic White, reports the U.S. Census Bureau. And by 2050, Whites will represent only about half the U.S. population (50.1 percent). (See "On the Horizon," below.)

Of note, some thought leaders question the oft-quoted graduation rates, such as

On the Horizon

Minority growth predictions, select years through 2050



Source: U.S. Census

those in the Census, as “misused” because they don’t take into account nontraditional students. In her article “For Graduation Rates, Time to Carve a New Yardstick,” (*Diverse*, July 2006), Patricia McGuire notes that graduation rates are often a measure of attendance versus outcomes. In other words, women who transfer schools or take longer than six years to complete school are characterized as “drop-outs.” Thus, low graduation numbers for all non-traditional students may be overstated.

But things are changing for the better. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, from 2000 to 2004, there was a 22 percent increase in Hispanic women entering college versus a 9.5 percent increase among White women for the same time period. (See “Picking Up Speed,” below.) But while they are getting into schools at a faster rate, they aren’t necessarily earning a four-year degree.

“What’s interesting as a whole in America is [the fate of] Hispanic girls,” says Nancy Ramsey, a Tiburon, Calif.–based futurist and author. “Their drop-out numbers are significant because many are working parents or single parents. Without education, they will never have an equal break.”

Again, the numbers bear that out. According to a 2005 College Board report, people with a four-year degree earn 62 percent more than those with just a high school diploma.

“The issue is: Do minority women have access to equitable, comprehensive,

educational experiences,” emphasizes Susan Lennon, executive director of the Washington, D.C.–based Women’s College Coalition.

To answer that question, we turned to leaders in the Hispanic, African-American, and Asian communities to paint a picture of what is needed to best serve the educational needs of women and girls in their groups in the coming decades.



Latina Leverage

The predominant cultural influence for Hispanics is family, according to Beatriz Robinson, a professor at St. Thomas University in Miami Gardens, Fla. “On the one hand, it’s very powerful and strong, but it also poses challenges in terms of choices,” she says. While they’re growing up, girls are expected to prepare dinner or take care of younger siblings. That makes it hard to get involved in volunteer and extracurricular activities.

In the past, a large cultural influence was machismo, where the male clearly dominates. While the impact of machismo is changing for girls and women who are more acculturated, it’s a tough cultural norm to break.

Robinson also points out that Hispanic culture teaches girls that authority is sacrosanct. And it’s not just the child, but also the parents. “It’s more of a Hispanic mindset to think that the schools will tell them what to do.”

According to Manuel Barrera, dean of the College of Education at Walden University in Minneapolis, most of the Latinas who get a degree are 25 years or older. “These women are not going to be the ones who get out

of high school and go right on to complete their degree,” Barrera says. “They complete their basic education and move into the adult world of work before they work on their degrees.”

That means that many Latinas are working full time and/or have husbands and children—or even parents and grandparents—to care for. “There really isn’t that much support for these women in the education systems,” Barrera says, adding that it would really help many Hispanic women if universities offered ways to attend school while also taking care of their family.

Another challenge is that Latinas are told that it’s important to get an education, but there isn’t anyone who can help them create a roadmap of how to get to college, which college to choose, and even how to progress in a career. Fortunately, Lennon points out, third-generation Hispanic students enjoy more family support than previous generations. As attitudes toward education change, Hispanic girls will receive more support from home.

Robinson contends that schools and professional organizations could do a lot more to reach out to Hispanic parents. Moreover, she recommends that career guidance be started early in school for girls. “For a young girl who might not see many options through her family, just showing the options opens up the possibilities,” Robinson points out.

African Americans Advance

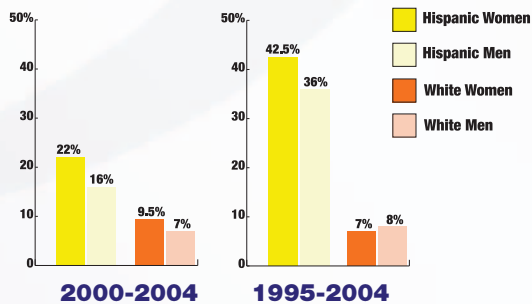
Dr. Lyungai Mbilinyi, a research consultant with the Degrees of Opportunity Study sponsored by Minneapolis-based Capella University, says that for African-American women and girls, the challenge is not just access to education but rather access to quality education.

“Structural disadvantages to the African-American community are still negatively impacting our young sisters and brothers,”




Picking Up Speed

Increase in college enrollment by racial, ethnic groups



Source: U.S. Department of Education from *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*



Mbilinyi says. “African-American communities are disproportionately represented in low-income, racially segregated communities, which are often not provided with quality education or high expectations.”

African-American girls may find that their friends from the neighborhood are not on the education track and that their association with them and with others who may not understand, or be threatened by their forward movement, can create stress, says Stanley S. Clawar, a professor and coordinator of sociology at Rosemont College in Pennsylvania.

Clawar points out that class is more salient today than race in predicting success. He points to the 2006 book *Social Class and Stratification*, edited by Rhonda F. Levine: “It is clearly evident in this connection that many talented and educated blacks are now entering positions of prestige and influence at a rate comparable to whites with equal qualifications. It is equally clear that the black underclass is in a hopeless state of economic stagnation, falling further and further behind the rest of society.”

Encouragement and expectation to pursue higher education are equally important, Mbilinyi says. According to Capella’s study, African-American women were more likely to have been told that they weren’t “college material,” compared to the general sample (23 percent vs. 16 percent).

The two biggest educational barriers for African-American women are time and money, the study finds. Many women accrue debt from their loans and other educational expenses. They also often have a job, or multiple jobs, which impact on their studies and their ability to participate in on-campus activities.

Education is highly valued among African-American women, Mbilinyi emphasizes. They are more likely than other adults to return to school (59 percent vs. 47 percent), or consider returning to school (74 percent vs. 56 percent), later in life, according to the Degrees of Opportunity study.

It’s also clear that family has a particularly big impact on the choices of African-American women, Mbilinyi says.

They were more likely than the average adult (50 percent vs. 35 percent) to name their mother as their greatest educational influence in childhood, and more frequently named their children (24 percent vs. 9 percent) and/or extended family as having influence over their current education decisions.

Mbilinyi says that women have to lead by example. “If we’re serious about women and girls in terms of educational opportunities, then we have to offer the accessibility and flexibility.”

She says that more flexible options like online education are making it possible for more working adults to return to school and study when they want and where they want. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, online education is growing 10 times faster than traditional brick and mortar colleges.

Many of these programs offer financial aid, which is something many adults aren’t aware is an option for them. This has been a critical step in making higher education a more viable option for many African-American women, and adults in general.

Asian Attitudes

“Asian immigrant families still carry old world values, [which are] both good and bad,” explains Grace Wong, a professor at New York University, who specializes in multicultural issues related to Asians. “A positive one is the emphasis on education, which has its roots in Confucianism.”

This centuries-old method of success compels so many Asian immigrants to groom their children toward college and higher education. But, even a good thing could have a negative side as emphasis on education sometimes becomes a source of extreme pressure on the children.

At school, Asian parents expect girls to do as well as boys. But, many immigrant parents have to work long hours to make ends meet, Wong notes, adding that parents often are not able to assist their children with schoolwork because of the language or educational difference.



Since education in the United States is free through the public school systems, girls no longer have to sacrifice school if the family’s money is limited. “With education, girls have more power and income,” Wong says.

Wong notes the Asian culture continues to emphasize males over females rather than seeing both genders as equal. That inequity is still subtly present today. “While many westernized Asians have moved away from this stance, girls can still be taken less seriously in moments, and this can have an insidious effect on a woman’s sense of self and their personal power in the world,” Wong explains.

She says that Asian girls and women continue to need role models who look more like themselves to help them deal with body image issues, self-acceptance, and appropriate assertiveness.

Asian Americans have begun to move beyond majoring only in the sciences and technology and the graduates now have a broader range of majors, according to Wong. “While still drawn to financially stable type work, more Asians are venturing into the arts, social services, law, and politics,” Wong says, adding that because a high percentage of college graduates are Asian American (twice as much as their proportion in the large population), more Asians will likely enter the workforce and end up at a higher level than previous generations.

Common Values

Among the minority groups interviewed here, common themes emerge: lack of role models, lack of financial resources, and lack of programs that capture the imaginations and hopes of minority women early in their educational careers. Many forward-thinking organizations have already addressed these issues.

Mount St. Mary’s College in Los Angeles is one. “We embraced the tradition [of educating minorities] more than 30 years ago,” says Jacqueline Powers Doud, its president. The school’s popula-

tion includes 40 percent Hispanic, 18 percent Asian-Pacific, 19 percent White, and 10 percent African American. Nearly all the students (98 percent) receive some form of financial aid, and 36 percent of students come from families that earn less than \$30,000 a year.

Over the past decade, the school's commitment to educating this diverse group has paid off: 26 students were named Rockefeller Brothers Fund Scholars for Aspiring Teachers of Color—more than any other college in the country.

The secret to its success? According to Powers Doud, "You have to ignite in these students that they are capable. Our faculty whets their appetite—and they offer financial and mentorship support. We actually help them fill out forms and letters of recommendation for graduate school."

Sarita Pillai, project director for the Education Development Center, a division of the Education, Employment, and Community Program in Boston, is part of another program that focuses on minority women. The center does work around the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) disciplines.

"At the core of our program is to get minority women to pursue STEM education," Pillai explains. "A lot of our work is in middle and high school. We find with girls that they are discouraged because they don't have role models."

Giving minority girls access to "experiential learning that is inquiry and hands-on based" encourages them to consider fields in which they are underrepresented, Pillai says. "One way to create a meaningful program is to show them that STEM fields are about solving real world problems that are important. ... It's about developing critical thinking, collaboration, leadership, and communication. These [girls] often have these skills but don't think they are valid."

Lennon believes that helping minority women persist to graduation is dependent on the level of engagement. "What I emphasize with prospective students and others who influence the college search process, is that they must find the school that is the right fit for them, the school

where they will thrive academically and personally," she says.

Future Proof

Ultimately, an important goal of the education of all women is to ensure their economic futures. "There is more divorce among women and [more] women choosing to be single. It is necessary for them to economically finance their whole lives and to do that they need an education," Ramsey points out.

When it comes to parity for women, Ramsey worries. "We have to ask ourselves, 'Will we be able to afford a public education system and junior colleges?'" she wonders, reminding us that the people who took us to the moon were the product of public schools—and that minorities are the largest group to use junior colleges as a spring-board to a four-year degree.

Federal and state funding for education and financial assistance to students who wish to attend private institutions must be preserved.

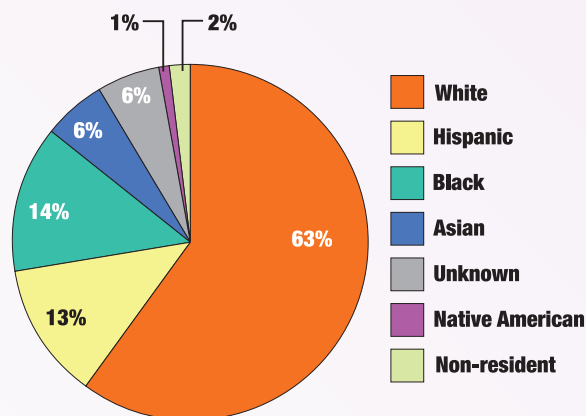
Ramsey also believes women get a glimpse of the inflexible workplace they will be launched into after four years in school in terms of balancing family and work—and the fact that they will make only about 75 cents for every \$1 that men make (make that 56 cents if they are Hispanic and 68 cents if they are African American)—and get discouraged.

Ramsey notes that there is no rational explanation for the issue of why women don't have equality with men in the workforce other than a general unwillingness to acknowledge a need for equality. "More than a prejudice against women, we need to look at the dynamic of a preference for men," she explains. "Things are changing and improving, but lingering social and societal roles run deep."

What will level the playing field, Ramsey thinks, is the mass exodus of the approximately 76 million baby

Taking Attendance

Undergraduate enrollment by race and ethnic group



Source: American Council on Education

boomers from the workforce over the next decade. "The natural attrition of the baby boomers will move women up. ... What's also changing is that [corporate America] will no longer have the luxury of making the subtle—or unsubtle—selection of white men over women or minorities."

Comments on the future from thought leaders are cautiously optimistic. "I like to look at the future as full of opportunities, not challenges," Lennon says. "Discovery and advancements are made at the intersections of diversity of thought."

"Our work is not over," Lennon adds. "We need to reach out to new immigrants; there is a huge opportunity for [colleges and universities] to assist them and enhance their representation in and contributions to higher education."

There are those who believe AAUW must hold ground on the front lines of the equality fight, keeping in place the gains that have been hard won. "Unless there are regulations supporting equality, the reality of equality will be gone," warns Ramsey. "AAUW's place in the new world order is as a watchdog. It must guarantee rights in education because if they aren't enforced, they'll slip away." ❏

Cati O'Keefe is a freelance writer in Cincinnati. Jennifer Popovec contributed research to this report.