

Boys' poor reading skills might help explain higher education gender gap

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David Geary is a Curators Distinguished Professor of Psychological Sciences in the College of Arts and Science at the University of Missouri. Credit: University of Missouri

Researchers at the University of Missouri and the University of Essex in

the United Kingdom found boys' poor reading skills in adolescence, combined with the social attitudes about women attending college, can help explain why fewer men than women enroll in higher education or other types of post-high school education.

Their findings were published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"Reading scores are important for both boys and [girls](#), and we know that girls, on average, score better on reading tests," said co-author David Geary, a Curators Distinguished Professor of Psychological Sciences in the College of Arts and Science.

Geary said adolescent [reading scores](#) and social attitudes toward women attending college can predict the ratio of men and women attending college or other post-[secondary education](#).

"Here, we studied a snapshot of reading achievements for boys and girls when they were 15 years old," he said. "And with an understanding of how social attitudes are in various countries about girls going to college, we can predict the ratio of men and women attending college five years later."

Geary and his co-author Gijbert Stoet, a professor of psychology at University of Essex, analyzed three international databases: post-secondary education enrollment data between 2011-2017 from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development; national reading scores for 15- and 16-year-olds from the Program for International Student Assessment; and social attitudes toward women pursuing university education from the World Values Survey. Specifically, the researchers looked at one question in the World Values Survey that read, "A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl." In total, the data represents over 400,000 boys and girls

in 18 countries.

Stoet explains why social attitudes should be considered along with reading scores.

"An important factor to consider is the degree to which people across the world believe that a college education is equally important for girls as it is for boys," Stoet said. "Although more and more girls have been going to college, girls are still more likely than boys to be at a disadvantage in terms of [social attitudes](#); this is a bigger problem in some countries than in others."

Geary said the study paints a bleak picture for reducing this [gender gap](#)—unless reading skills are improved.

"The practical implication is that equity in college enrollment is well out of reach at this time," Geary said. "There is no good reason to expect that national reading levels for either gender will be sufficiently raised in the coming decade to change enrollment patterns. The way to counter that is to improve reading skills, but that improvement will have to start early in life. The reading gap between boys and girls is there from the very beginning of schooling, even in preschool."

The study, "Gender differences in the pathways to [higher education](#)," was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

More information: Gijsbert Stoet et al, Gender differences in the pathways to higher education, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2002861117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2002861117)

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