



HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMAS FUNDAMENTAL FOR WOMEN

Women Stay the Course With Fewer Dropouts

It is no secret in American culture that women have always highly regarded formal education. Years before women were allowed to vote or garner enough votes to hold political office, they still made the connection that a high school education was essential for greater opportunities.

In terms of earning high school diplomas, women have traditionally had fewer high school dropouts than males. As **Figure 1** indicates, 56,800 females graduated from high school in 1900, compared with 38,100 male high school graduates, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, guaranteeing women the right to vote, sending out a clear message that a woman's opinion mattered politically. Four years later, the first woman governor, Nellie Taylor Ross, was elected, again reaffirming the message to women that their voice was important in American society and their opportunities for growth were expanding.

Both sexes experienced gradual growth over the first four decades of the twentieth century and did not see a decrease in terms of high school graduates until the early 1940's. Young men left America's classrooms to fight WWII, while women – some of them high school age – joined the workforce to support the war effort. In 1940, there were 642,800 female high school graduates, compared with 578,700 male high school graduates. Those numbers dropped slightly eight years later to 627,000

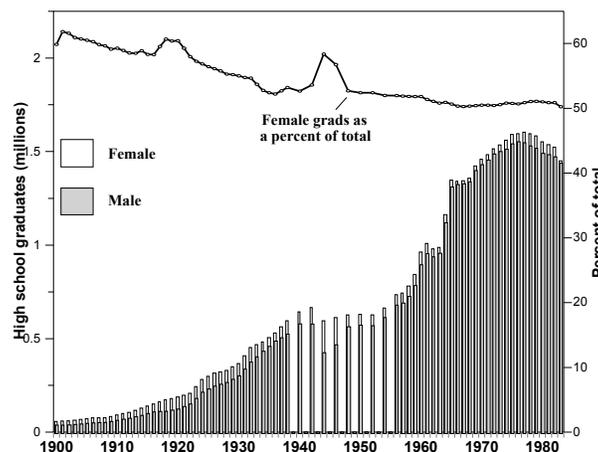
female high school graduates and 563,000 male high school graduates.

After leveling off in the 1940's and 1950's, the number of female high school graduates didn't begin another upswing until the 1960's, when feminism began taking hold. During that decade, women saw a noticeable jump in 1965 of 360,000 female high school graduates, an increase of 36 percent from two years previous when 987,000 females received their high school diplomas.

The margin between female high school graduates and male high school graduates has continued to decrease towards the second half of the twentieth century. However, women are more likely to avoid dropping out of high school than males. Over the twentieth century

(the number of high school graduates has not been reported by gender since 1983), more women have consistently received their high school diplomas than their male counterparts. In 1981, they witnessed President Reagan appoint Sandra Day O'Connor as the first woman Supreme Court Justice. It would only be 12 years later that a record number of women running for political office – some 20 percent - would win elections across America.

Figure 1. –High School Graduates By Sex: 1900 – 1983



Source: Data on the number of high school graduates by sex is not reported after 1983.
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*; National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1999.

Women have always viewed a high school education as an indispensable stepping stone in terms of gaining professional opportunities. And as the data shows, there is nothing to expect but more of the same.