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More Students Earning STEM Degrees, Report Shows

The upward trend in the last decade has been driven by a growth in degrees in 'hard sciences.'



More bachelor's degrees are being awarded in STEM fields.

By Allie Bidwell | Jan. 27, 2015 | 12:01 a.m. EST

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Science, technology, engineering and math degrees have become incrementally more common for both men and women over the last decade, a new report shows.

Driven by a growth in the "hard sciences" – such as computer science, engineering, and physical and biological sciences – the prevalence of STEM degrees increased between 2004 and 2014 at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels, according to a report from the National Student Clearinghouse.

At the same time, the proportion of students majoring in social sciences and psychology held steady or decreased in all categories.

"This data demonstrates the importance of tracking science and engineering degree attainment at different levels and within specific fields of study," Doug Shapiro, executive research director of the clearinghouse's research center, said in a statement. "Both men and women are increasingly choosing STEM degrees, particularly in the hard sciences. But in terms of the shares of degrees earned within individual disciplines, women are gaining ground in some STEM areas, while losing ground in others."

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Overall, 40 percent of bachelor's degrees earned by men and 29 percent earned by women are now in STEM fields. At the doctoral level, more than half of the degrees earned by men (58 percent) and one-third earned by women (33 percent) are in STEM fields. While the share of STEM degrees as a percentage of all degrees earned has decreased in some categories in the last 10 years, that was primarily the result of a decrease in the number of social science and psychology degrees.

At the bachelor's degree level, though, women are losing ground, according to the report. Between 2004 and 2014, the share of STEM-related bachelor's degrees earned by women decreased in all seven discipline areas: engineering; computer science; earth, atmospheric and ocean sciences; physical sciences; mathematics; biological and agricultural sciences; and social sciences and psychology. The biggest decrease was in computer science, where women now earn less than 20 percent of bachelor's degrees (18 percent). In 2004, women earned nearly a quarter of computer science bachelor's degrees, at 23 percent.

Things look slightly better for women at the master's degree level, where the share earned by women increased in three areas (engineering, physical sciences and biological and agricultural sciences) and decreased in four. But women made the largest gains at the doctoral level, where the share of degrees earned by women increased in five of seven discipline areas.

The clearinghouse previously found the number of science and engineering bachelor's degree completions [grew twice as fast](#) as non-science and engineering disciplines between 2009 and 2013. Still, it found the gender distribution in STEM disciplines was largely unchanged during that time.

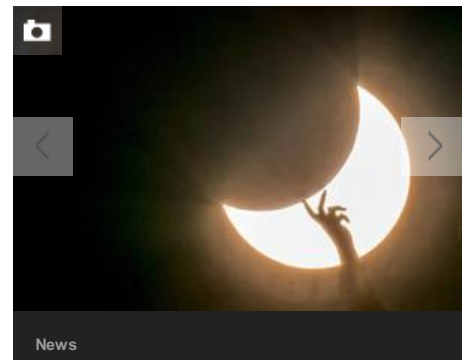
It's no secret, though, that there still exist large gender and racial gaps in STEM fields.

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A [previous report from the L'Oreal Foundation](#) analyzed data from 14 countries and found that women are three times less likely than men to become scientists. According to the report, women earned 32 percent of undergraduate degrees awarded in science, 30 percent of science master's degrees and 25 percent of science doctoral degrees.

But there also have been signs of incremental improvement. A [November report](#) from the college testing organization ACT found about half of ACT-tested graduates in 2014 were interested in STEM fields. While the percentage of students interested has held steady for several years, the overall number of students tested has increased, resulting in a higher absolute number of students interested in STEM areas. Those interested in STEM fields also tended to be more likely to meet the ACT's college readiness benchmarks in English, reading, math and science, the report found.

According to the [U.S. News/Raytheon STEM Index](#), high school student interest in STEM fields reached a low point in 2004, dropping nearly 19 percent from base-year calculations. Interest levels climbed steadily until 2009, when they began to decline again. Despite the intense drive to encourage students to study science, interest levels fell between 2009 and 2013 and are now just slightly below where they were in 2000. The index overall shows there have only been modest gains in overall STEM activity since 2000.



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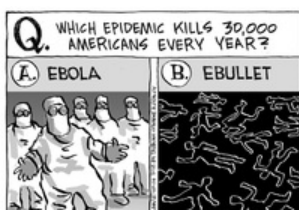
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