

FINAL WORD ↗ BY TIM ROWLAND

Missing Boys?

The recent spate of book banning is, in fact, not so recent. Twenty years ago, before meddling parents were banning the likes of Nora Roberts and Amanda Gorman, meddling administrators were banning books on welding, masonry, and small-engine repair.

High school boys who routinely fed the hallways of “shop class” were instead being channeled into the wondrous, high-flying world of tech. So instead of coming out of school knowing how to build a house, they came out knowing how to program a glowing screen of alien invaders. This, we were told, was progress.

The result was palpable, as anyone who has waited six months for a contractor can attest. In the four northernmost counties in New York, according to a study by Camoin Associates of Saratoga Springs, 25 percent of electricians and other skilled tradesmen vanished in a five-year period. In their place were jokes about doctors-turned-plumbers who changed careers for better pay.

Tech, meanwhile, was glamorized by a handful of Silicon Valley types who famously dropped out of college because they wanted to learn faster than school could teach—and became rich in the process. High school nerds now saw the world through the same lens as high school athletes: schooling was to be endured, not leveraged.

In white, rural America, young men who had been told their lives wouldn't be worth a hill of beans without a college degree came limping back home bitter and discouraged after discovering they were not college material. Certainly, this helped feed the MAGA narrative that college was a chum bucket of wokeness that wasn't worth their time anyhow.

In the cities, black men from disadvantaged families found college came with too

few opportunities and too much debt. This fed the narrative that university was just one more white-man con, another form of enslavement as their wages were seemingly garnished to enrich wealthy bankers.

All this has resulted in a not-so-baffling circumstance: boys are abandoning college altogether. According to the National Center of Educational Statistics, female enrollment in 2020—granted, a highly atypical year—dropped 2 percent, while for boys it fell 7 percent. The most recent figures show the gap has narrowed, but the bottom-line disparity remains, with boys making up just 42 percent of college enrollments.



An emerging explanation is the familiar market metric, return on investment. Boys, not the most patient of creatures, see the staggering up-front cost of higher learning and weigh it against the money they can earn now, particularly as employee-starved states and companies are dropping degree requirements for many decent jobs. Their understandable conclusion is that college has priced itself out of the market.

According to a report by St. Louis Fed economist Guillaume Vandembroucke, a college degree still pays off over the course of a lifetime, but ... it's complicated. To start, tuition has risen almost three times as fast as inflation since 1980. Despite this, Van-

denbroucke's research shows that—a college degree being considered as a typical asset—the ROI is significant, more than might be earned by taking your tuition money and plunking it down in the stock market. But you only get that return if you see college all the way through. And understanding and successfully committing to that is asking a lot of teenage boys, as anyone who has ridden in a car with an 18-year-old can attest.

A second eye-catching item in Vandembroucke's work is the shrinking value of a degree for black males. In 1980 a white male could expect a 20.5 percent return on a college education, a rate that by 2020 had increased to 24.1 percent. Black males, meanwhile, could expect a healthy 22.9 percent return in 1980, but by 2020 this had dropped to 14.2 percent. People of color have noticed. While college enrollment for both races fell in the first year of the

pandemic, white enrollment bounced back the following year while black enrollment continued to decline.

In a post-truth America, administrators' metronomical message that “College pays, take our word for it!” might not be resonating the way it once did. All of this has begun to heat the water around the academic frog, a phenomenon that seems likely to continue as kids turn back to well-paying trades, learn how to code or speak Chinese from YouTube, or adapt to artificial intelligence.

If that's true, we may have to admit something few of us were willing to consider before: the boys just might be right. **R**

TIM ROWLAND is the author of *Politics Weird-o-Pedia: The Ultimate Book of Surprising, Strange, and Incredibly Bizarre Facts about Politics* (Racehorse Publishing, 2019).