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The Conservative Plot to Push Women out of Higher Education

Before changes in law and culture in the second half of the twentieth century, many American women had to depend on the men in their lives for financial security, and had little opportunity to forge their own paths. Although the cultural image of the “happy homemaker” (almost always a conventionally attractive, well dressed, and financially well-off white woman) has regained popularity in the form of online “trad wife” content, the lifestyle these women are imitating harkens back to a time when women had very little autonomy over their own lives.

One of the most significant shifts in the fight for gender equality came when women began to more frequently enroll in higher education. **The ability to earn a degree was a critical part of women finally being able to make decisions about their own lives and harness economic power for themselves.** No longer were their futures or finances completely at the whims of the men around them. In 1950, women [made up just under 24%](#) of college graduates. By 2025, 58.5% of bachelor’s degrees and 62.8% of master’s degrees were [earned by women](#).

As women’s economic and societal power grew, the control men had over them lessened. To recalibrate this balance of power, conservative lawmakers, influencers, and organizations are pushing policies that aim to reverse the progress women have made, including in education, in order to return to a time when a woman’s life was firmly focused on marriage and motherhood—and was under the control of men.

Policy Blueprint: The Heritage Foundation and Project 2025

The Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank behind Project 2025, is eager to plug into the growing sentiment that places a woman’s role firmly in the home. In its latest report from January 2026, [Saving America by Saving the Family](#), the organization:

- Frames declining birthrates as a national crisis
- Blames women’s enrollment in higher education for delaying marriage and childbearing
- Criticizes feminism for its role in the “dissolution” of the American family by promoting “sexual, financial, and familial ‘freedom’” for women and shifting their views about “men, marriage, and the home”

The Policies in Practice

The Heritage Foundation’s report includes [a number of alarming “solutions”](#) to reverse declining marriage and birth rates in America, but one of the most insidious of these so-called solutions is to undermine women’s educational opportunities. The Heritage Foundation report specifically opposes the rise of “unnecessary years of higher education” that they complain has led women to delay marriage and childrearing. Some of the strategies the Heritage Foundation and the Trump administration are employing to make it harder for women to earn a degree include:

1. Making it harder for women to afford a higher education
2. Creating a campus culture that reinforces strict gender roles and promotes early marriage and parenthood
3. Attacking avenues for women and LBTQIA+ students’ advancement within higher education

1. MAKE IT HARDER FOR WOMEN TO AFFORD A HIGHER EDUCATION

The Heritage Foundation recommends dramatically scaling back student loan programs, claiming that the resulting debt delays women’s readiness for marriage and children. Specifically, it decries the impact of college loans and grants “on fertility,” because it has led to “millions of Americans to spend more time in higher education,” and because “long-term debt act[s] as a perceived barrier to forming a family.”

While restricting student loan debt may seem like a net positive, these policy “solutions” do not address or change the staggering cost of education in the U.S—instead they [restrict students’](#) ability to meet the rising costs of enrollment. The restriction particularly impacts women, because they [take out more loans](#) than men and hold about [two-thirds of student debt](#), while women of color, particularly Black women, hold the highest levels of student loan debt as a result of systemic inequities.

However, rather than focusing on making it easier for women to pursue an education without going into debt, the Trump administration and its allies in Congress are reversing decades-long policies that enabled more students, especially women, to obtain a graduate degree. Some of the ways they are doing this include:

- Eliminating the [Grad PLUS loan](#) program and capping annual and lifetime student loan borrowing for new borrowers, the majority of whom are women. The Heritage Foundation [called for this elimination](#) in 2024, and saw their plans come to fruition when H.R.1, or the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, was passed into law in July 2025. The program will be officially eliminated on July 1, 2026.
- Significantly limiting the availability of graduate student loans for students pursuing [non “professional degrees”](#) in programs where women make up the [majority of graduates](#), which impacts whether many women can enroll in graduate school at all. It is no coincidence that [women hold over 75%](#) of master’s and doctorate degrees for these specific impacted programs: registered nursing, dental hygiene, occupational therapy, audiology, social work, teaching, and public health.
- [Capping](#) lifetime student loan borrowing for specific categories of current student borrowers, impacting students who took a leave of absence before completing their degree or are enrolled part-time. This will disproportionately impact [student survivors](#) of sexual violence, [pregnant students](#), and [student parents](#), the majority of whom are women and often need leaves of absence or part-time enrollment to complete their education.

2. CREATE A CAMPUS CULTURE THAT REINFORCES STRICT GENDER ROLES AND PROMOTES EARLY MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD

The Heritage Foundation’s report laments that, while young women’s employment has not changed much since the year 2000, “changes in women’s education and career goals have affected marriage and fertility.” They also highlight that delayed marriage tends to lead to a delay in having children. According to the report, “this delay could be explained in part by increases in female college enrollment.”

It is clear that conservative organizations [want women to be having children](#), and have them young. Conservative commentators have even [gone on the record](#) to bemoan recent drops in teen pregnancy rates. But when given the ability to choose, women are largely refusing to fall in line—prioritizing their own career and education goals over what men think they should do with their time. To remedy this, the Heritage Foundation suggests promoting a “ring by spring” culture at more college campuses. They want to shift the focus of higher education by:

- Giving wedding discounts to students who allow their colleges to use their wedding photos in promotional materials
- Developing curricula that teach students “pre-marital education”
- Instilling in young people their belief that the “near-guarantee for life success” is “graduating from high school, getting married, and having children—in that order”

3. ATTACK AVENUES FOR WOMEN AND LGBTQIA+ STUDENTS’ ADVANCEMENT WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION.

It’s no secret that conservative lawmakers, groups such as the Heritage Foundation, and [authoritarian leaders](#) see most places of higher learning as a threat to their power—Trump himself [famously threatened](#) a variety of elite universities during his second term. When it comes to higher education programs that are specifically intended to advance critical thinking skills for students, including those that involve interrogating structural hierarchies like the patriarchy, conservative lawmakers and the Heritage Foundation are especially eager to dismantle them.

The Heritage Foundation has also been clear about its hostility towards the LGBTQIA+ community, stating in its recent report that, “the LGBTQ agenda...through the Supreme Court of the United States, redefined marriage and severed it in law from its natural biological function and purpose of reproduction.” The Trump administration has followed through on these recommendations by issuing [executive orders](#), [weaponizing](#) Title IX enforcement to attack trans students’ rights, and [rescinding agency](#) agreements that protected trans students. Their attacks have included:

- [Encouraging the elimination](#) of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) and [other programs](#) focused on supporting women and LGBTQIA+ students. While many of these programs have already been eliminated as a result of hostile state legislation, the Trump administration’s [attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion](#) has emboldened state lawmakers to shutter these programs. Recently, the Trump administration [touted](#) closures of WGSS programs as a victory, [wrongly asserting](#) these programs “lack... workforce-benefiting skills.”

- Ignoring Title IX complaints filed by student survivors of sexual violence. The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights resolved [zero sexual harassment or violence cases](#) in the first year of Trump's second term after dismantling much of its enforcement capacity. Notably, the first Trump administration, consistent with the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 plan, removed longstanding Title IX protections for students who are sexually harassed and assaulted. They accomplished this with the [help of men's rights advocates](#) and—as [the Epstein files reveal](#)—the private enthusiasm of Jeffrey Epstein, who believed the rule's weakened protections shield Lawrence Krauss, a professor Epstein was helping who was facing a Title IX sexual harassment complaint. Despite the Biden administration's efforts to reverse the action and NWLC [challenge](#) in court, Trump has been able to reinstate the rollback during his [second term](#).
- Making campuses less safe for women and LGBTQIA+ students, especially transgender students, by pushing policy changes that would force family structures that the Heritage Foundation [deems appropriate](#) (i.e. straight marriages), stating in their report that “[federal] policies should favor natural marriage over same-sex and polyamorous relationships, cohabitation, or intentional single parenthood.” This reveals a worldview in which roles and behaviors are fixed based on sex assigned at birth, and where same-sex relationships and gender fluidity are direct threats.

By making college campuses less safe for students, and particularly for women and girls, and attacking women and LGBTQIA+ programs in schools, conservative lawmakers are attempting to stack the odds against these groups in an effort to push them out of academic life.

The Return to An Era Women Rejected

Adult women should be able to marry and have children whenever they choose, **but we risk a dangerous backslide when lawmakers erase the opportunities for women to pursue higher education before or instead of marriage and childbearing.**

If conservative lawmakers want American women to bear more children, they should be guaranteeing paid family leave, universal child care, and protection against pregnancy discrimination, or pushing to make education more affordable and inclusive of pregnant and parenting students. Instead, they continue to attack the very systems that would help overburdened women and mothers. This is because their real goal is to erase women's presence in economic, political, academic, and public life.

Instead of offering innovative solutions to the barriers women face, their answer is to try to drag the country back to a time we have already experienced and rejected: when only men had access to educational opportunities and the resulting economic benefits.