

Trends in Educational Attainment: U.S. Catching Up to Utah

June 21, 2006

The U.S. Census Bureau has been collecting information on educational attainment of the U.S. population since 1940. The Census reports such statistics as the percent of the adult population (25 years and older) that has graduated from high school and the percent of the adult population with a bachelor's degree or higher. Recently, the Census published a report on educational attainment in the 50 states plus the District of Columbia from 1940 to 2000.[1] These data allow us to examine both state and national historical trends in educational attainment, and to compare Utah to the other states over time. Since 1940, Utah has consistently surpassed the national average in the percent of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. However, particularly in the last two decades, Utah has slid down in the rankings. In 1940, Utah ranked 5th highest in the nation for the percent of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher (see Figure 1).[2] By 2000, Utah had fallen to 16th place in the national rankings. While male adults in Utah slipped from 3rd place in 1940 down to 9th place in 2000, female adults in Utah fell much further in the rankings: from 9th place down to 25th place.

Figure 1: Utah's National Ranking for Percent of Adults (25 and Older) with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher

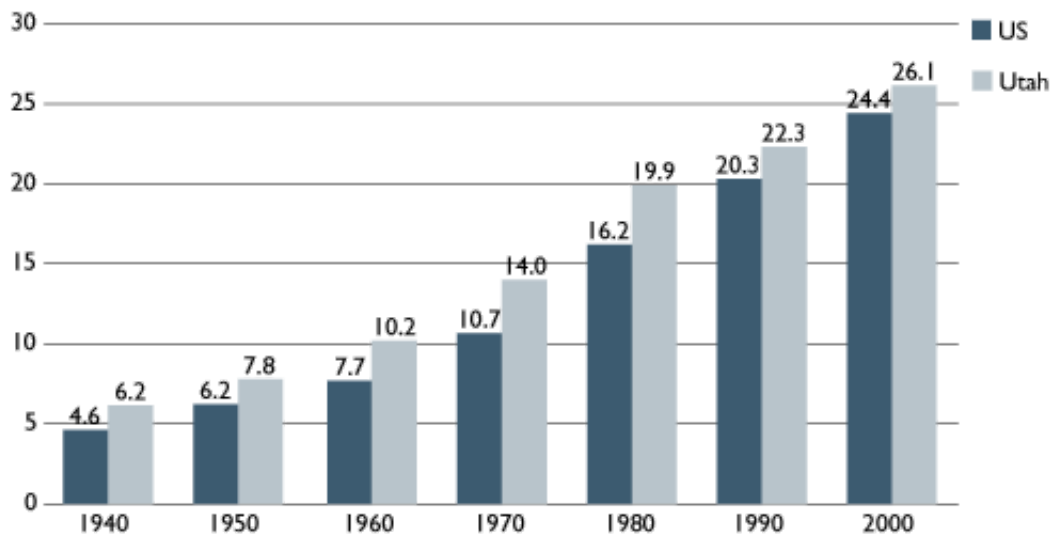
	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Utah Combined	5	4	3	4	8	15	16
Utah Male	3	5	3	2	4	9	9
Utah Female	9	9	9	12	13	23	25

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Utah's Slide in the Rankings

The decline in Utah's rankings is not because fewer Utahns have college degrees. On the contrary, the percent of Utah adults and the percent of U.S. adults with a bachelor's degree or higher have both steadily increased over the last six decades (see Figure 2). Nationally, the percent of college graduates increased from 4.6 percent in 1940 to 24.4 percent in 2000. The percent of college graduates in Utah rose from 6.2 percent in 1940 to 26.1 percent in 2000. Utah has slipped in its national ranking because the percentage of college graduates in Utah is increasing at a slower rate than the percentage of college graduates nationally.

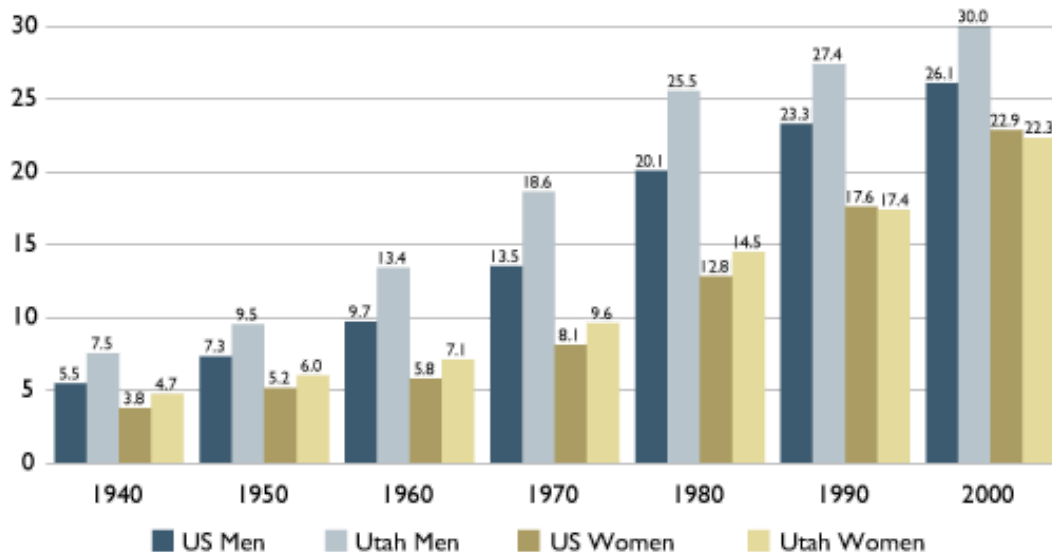
Figure 2: Percent of Adults (25 and Older) with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Within Utah, both men and women are experiencing rising levels of educational attainment (see Figure 3). In 1940, just 7.5 percent of Utah men had a bachelor's degree or higher. By 2000, 30 percent of Utah men were college graduates. The percent of Utah women with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 4.7 percent in 1940 to 22.3 percent in 2000. Utah women, however, have not been keeping up with national trends. Although Utah women are increasingly participating in higher education, they are doing so at a significantly slower rate than American women overall, especially during the last two decades. Consequently, Utah females have fallen 16 places (from 9th to 25th) in national rankings with respect to the percent of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. From 1940 to 1980, Utah women had higher than average educational attainment, but in 1990 and 2000 Utah women fell below the national average. In contrast, Utah men continue to earn bachelor's degrees or higher at a rate higher than the national average.

Figure 3: Percent of Adults (25 & Older) with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Sex

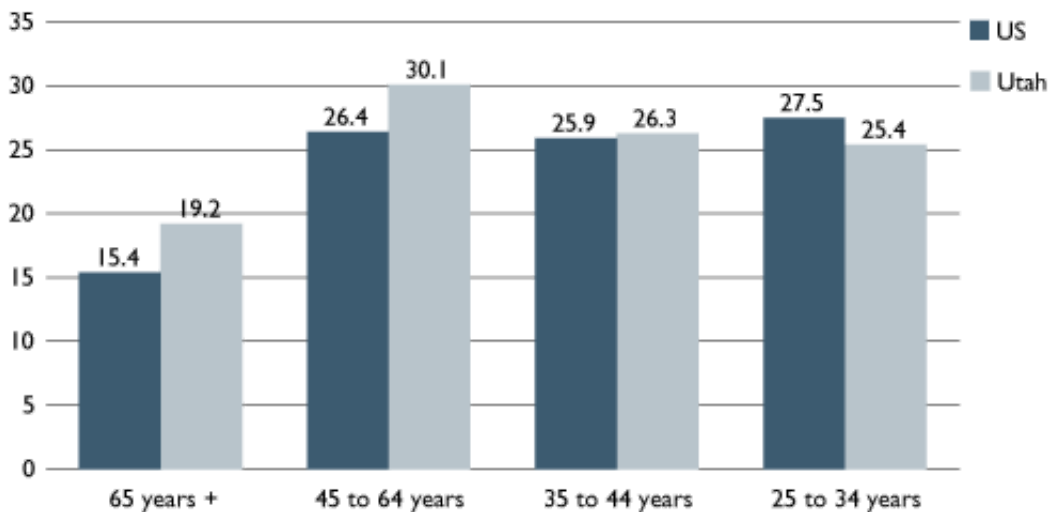


Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Educational Attainment by Age Group

We can also examine educational attainment by looking at the percent of college graduates within different age groups.^[3] Figure 4 shows that older Utahns (adults 45 to 64 years, and 65 years and older) are better educated than Americans overall. For adults ages 35 to 44, about the same percent of Utahns and Americans attain a bachelor's degree or higher. But for the youngest bracket of adults, ages 25 to 34, Utahns fall below the national average: 25.4 percent of Utahns versus 27.5 percent of Americans.

Figure 4: Percent of Age Group with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher in 2000

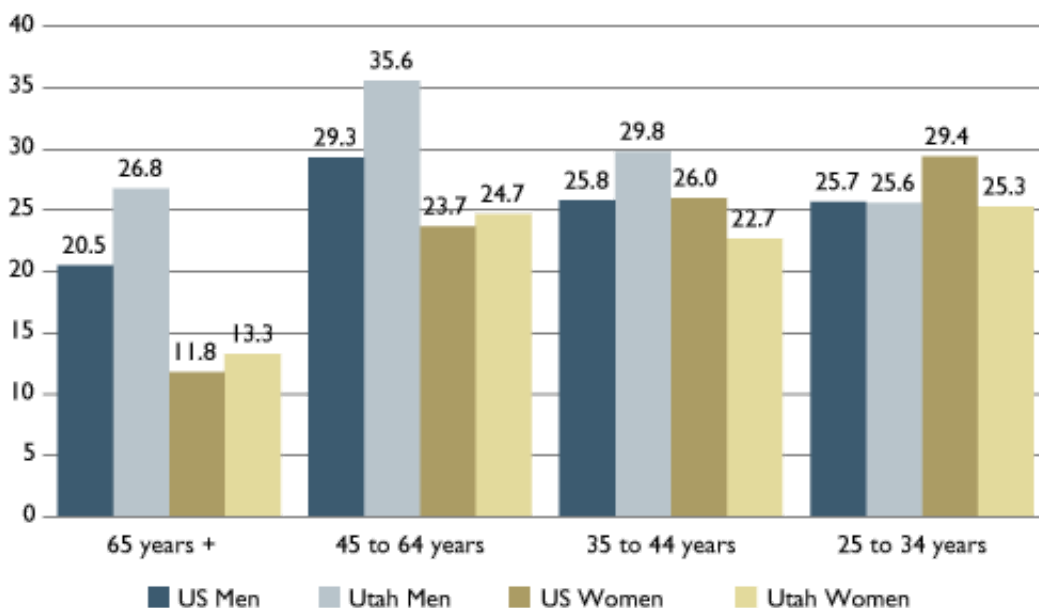


Source: U.S. Census Bureau

This lower level of educational attainment for Utah's younger adults is particularly concerning. Political leaders and economic development officials have often touted Utah's well-educated workforce as one of the state's economic strengths. Falling behind the national average in educational attainment could harm the state's economic competitiveness.

When we look at men and women separately, we observe that for both of the older brackets of adults (45-64 years, and 65 years and older), Utahns of both sexes are better educated than their national counterparts (see Figure 5). In the 35-44 year bracket, Utah women fall behind U.S. women by a significant margin. Within the youngest bracket, Utah women are increasing their education levels and are nearly even with Utah men, but they are over 4 percentage points below the average for U.S. women. Nationally, young women have been increasing their education levels much faster than young men and have been a major factor in the increasing level of educational attainment. Young Utah women are following this trend but at a slower rate than nationally, causing Utah to fall behind the national average.

Figure 5: Percent of Male and Female Age Groups with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher in 2000



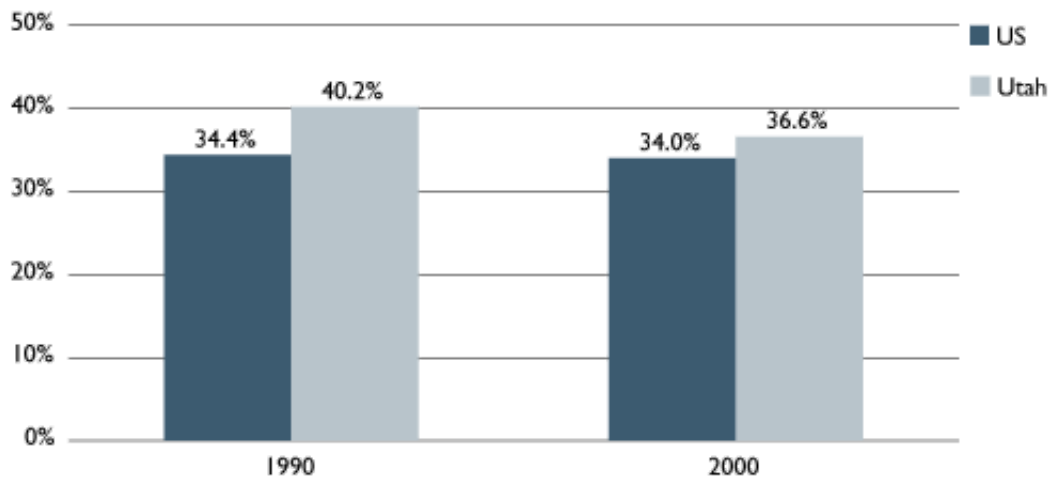
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Trends in College Enrollment

The data examined thus far are solely about those who have attained their degrees. To understand how the

number of college graduates may change in the near future, it is instructive to examine how many young Utahns are currently enrolled in higher education.[4] College enrollment for 18- to 24-year-olds declined in both the U.S. and Utah from 1990 to 2000 (see Figure 6). In Utah, college enrollment for college age persons fell from 40.2 percent in 1990 to 36.6 percent in 2000. This decline in college participation in Utah can be partly explained by increased immigration to the state by persons with low education levels.[5]

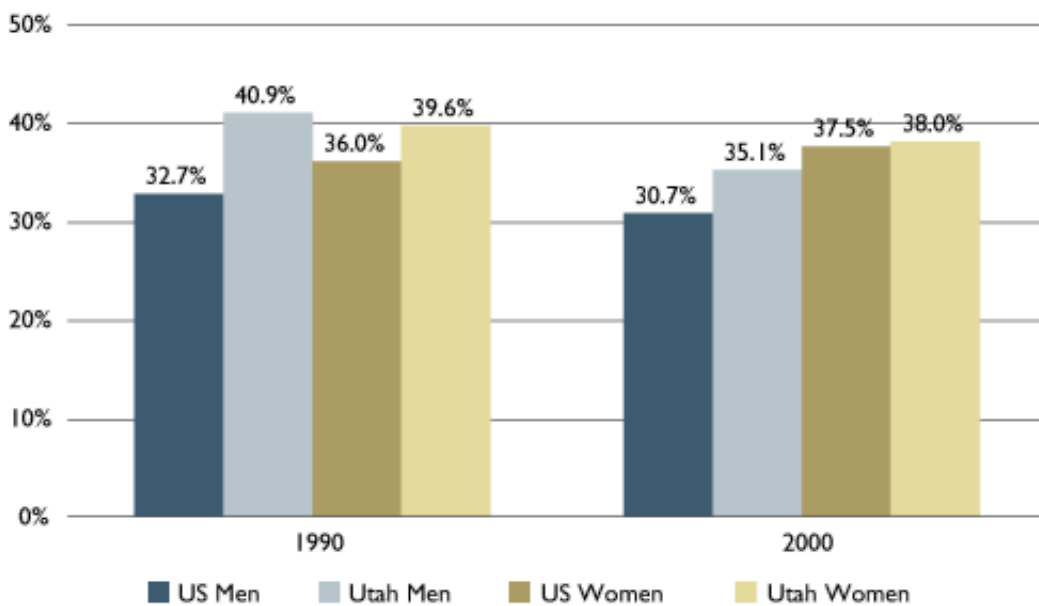
Figure 6: Percent of Adults 18 to 24 Attending College



Source: U.S. Census Bureau; Perlich

Utahns of both sexes exceeded the nation in college participation in 1990 and 2000 (see Figure 7). Although nationally there was a trend of declining college enrollment, U.S. women actually increased their college participation from 36 percent in 1990 to 37.5 percent in 2000. Utah women, in contrast, declined in participation, yet remained above the national average in 2000. Thus, while Utah women ages 18 to 24 attended college at above average rates in both 1990 and 2000, Utah women ages 25 to 34 had earned a college degree at a rate below the national average in 2000. Utah women are more likely to enroll in college than women nationally, but less likely to complete their degrees.[6]

Figure 7: Percent of Men and Women 18 to 24 Attending College



Source: U.S. Census Bureau; Perlich

Endnotes

[1]U.S. Census Bureau. "A Half-Century of Learning: Historical Census Statistics on Education Attainment in the US, 1940-2000." April 2006. Available online at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/introphct41.html>.

[2] These rankings include DC, but only include Hawaii and Alaska from 1960 onward. Thus, Utah ranks 5th out of 49 in 1940 and 16th out of 51 in 2000.

[3] Source of data for educational attainment by age group: U.S. Census Bureau. "Table QT-P20. Educational Attainment by Sex: 2000." Data Set: Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3) - Sample Data.

[4] Source for 1990 enrollment data: Perlich, Pamela S., Ph.D. "Long-term Demographic Trends Impacting Higher Education in Utah." May 2006. Available online at

http://www.business.utah.edu/updir/2655_bebr_HighEdTrends.pdf.

Source for 2000 enrollment data: U.S. Census Bureau. "Table PCT24. Sex by College or Graduate School Enrollment by Age for the Population 15 Years and Over." Data Set: Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3) - Sample Data

[5] See Perlich.

[6] See Perlich.

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