

Educational Attainment: Utah Falling Behind National Trends

October 29, 2009

In 2006, Utah Foundation published a research brief on Utah's educational attainment trends from 1940 to 2000.^[1] While Utah consistently surpassed the national average in terms of the percent of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher between 1940 and 2000, Utah's national ranking fell from fifth to 16th during this sixty-year period.^[2] Recent data show that Utah's ranking continued to follow this downward trend from 2000 to 2008 as well (see Figure 1).^[3] For instance, the percent of Utah adults 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher ranked 16th in the nation in 2000 and 18th in 2008.^[4] The ranking of the percent of Utah male adults with a bachelor's degree or higher slipped from ninth place in 2000 to 11th place in 2008 (Utah had ranked in the top five states consistently from 1940 through 1980), while the ranking of the percent of Utah female adults with a bachelor's degree or higher fell from 25th to 26th (this ranked ninth from 1940 through 1960 before declining to 25th in 2000).

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

Year	Utah Combined Rank	Utah Male Rank	Utah Female Rank
2000	26.6% 16	30.8% 9	22.4% 25
2001	25.3% 20	29.5% 14	21.2% 38
2002	27.3% 17	31.2% 9	23.4% 25
2003	26.2% 21	29.5% 17	23.0% 31
2004	28.0% 19	32.0% 10	24.1% 27
2005	27.9% 17	31.3% 12	24.5% 29
2006	28.6% 17	31.8% 9	25.4% 27
2007	28.7% 18	31.8% 11	25.6% 27
2008	29.1% 18	32.1% 11	26.1% 26

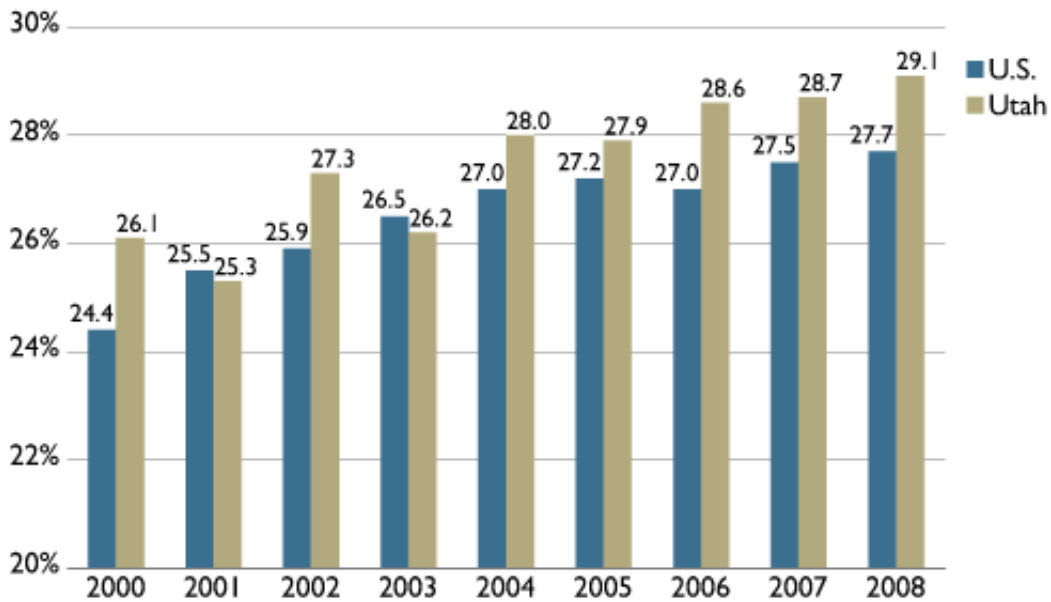
Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2000 data come from the Decennial Census. 2001-2008 data come from the American Community Survey.

This research brief examines Utah's recent trends in educational attainment, updating the work done in 2006. Data come from the U.S. Census Bureau's decennial census and American Community Survey. Census has collected information on educational attainment of the U.S. population in the decennial censuses since 1940, and more recently in annual surveys. It 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. These data allow one to examine both state and national historical trends in educational attainment and to compare Utah's attainment to other states over time.

Utah's Slide in the Rankings

Although Utah's national rankings have fallen since 1940, it is important to note that the decline does not indicate fewer Utah adults are obtaining college degrees. On the contrary, both the percent of Utah and U.S. adults with a bachelor's degree and higher have increased over the last eight years (see Figure 2). Nationally, the percent of college graduates increased from 24.4% in 2000 to 27.7% in 2008. The percent of college graduates in Utah rose from 26.1% in 2000 to 29.1% in 2008. This rising percentage indicates the decline in Utah's national ranking occurred because the percent of college graduates in Utah is increasing at a slower rate than the percent in other states.

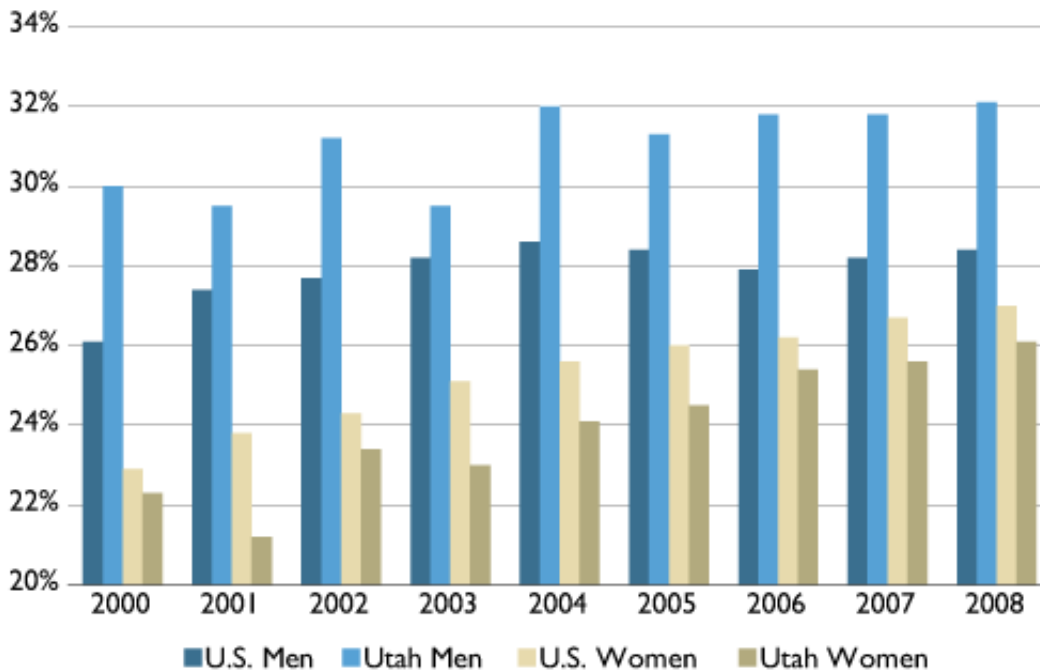
Figure 2: Percent of Adults (25 and Older) With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher



Source: Census.

Within Utah, both men and women have continued experiencing rising levels of educational attainment (see Figure 3). In 2000, 30% of Utah men had a bachelor's degree or higher. By 2008, 32.1% of Utah men were college graduates. The percent of Utah women with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 22.3% in 2000 to 26.1% in 2008. Utah women, however, have not been keeping up with national trends. Although more Utah women are participating in higher education, their level of participation is lower than women at the national level. In contrast, Utah men continue to earn bachelor degrees or higher at a level surpassing the national average.

Figure 3: Percent of Adults (25 and Older) With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Gender



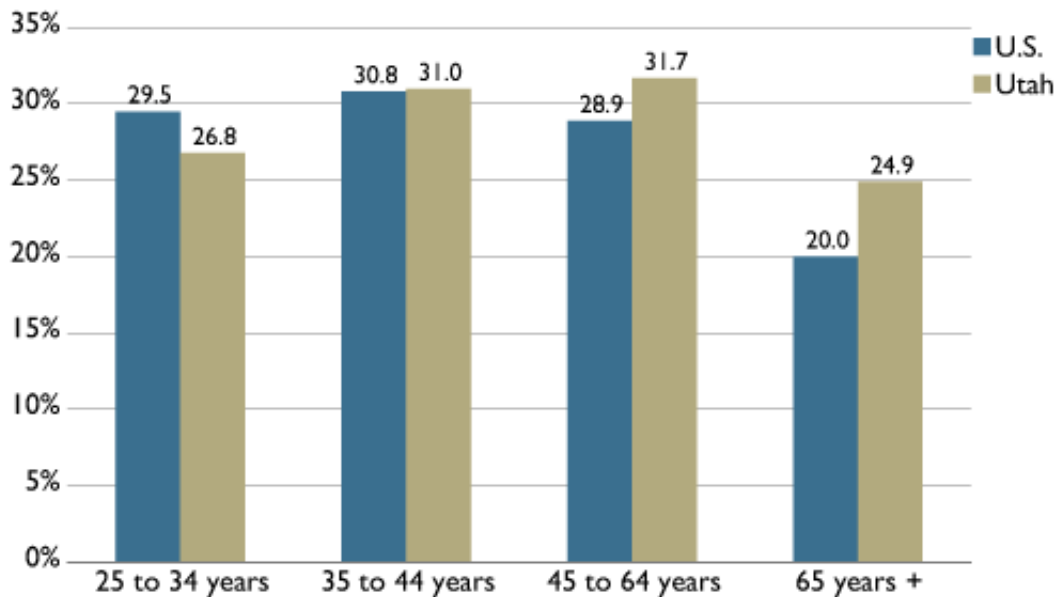
Source: Census.

Educational Attainment by Age Group

We can also examine educational attainment by looking at the percent of college graduates within different age

groups.[5] Figure 4 shows that older Utahns (adults 45-64 years, and 65 years and older) are better educated than the rest of the nation within their respective age groups. For adults ages 35-44, about the same percent of Utahns attain a bachelor's degree or higher as the rest of the nation. But for the youngest bracket of adults, ages 25-34, Utahns are falling below the national average; 26.8% vs. 29.5%.

Figure 4: Percent of Age Group With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher in 2008



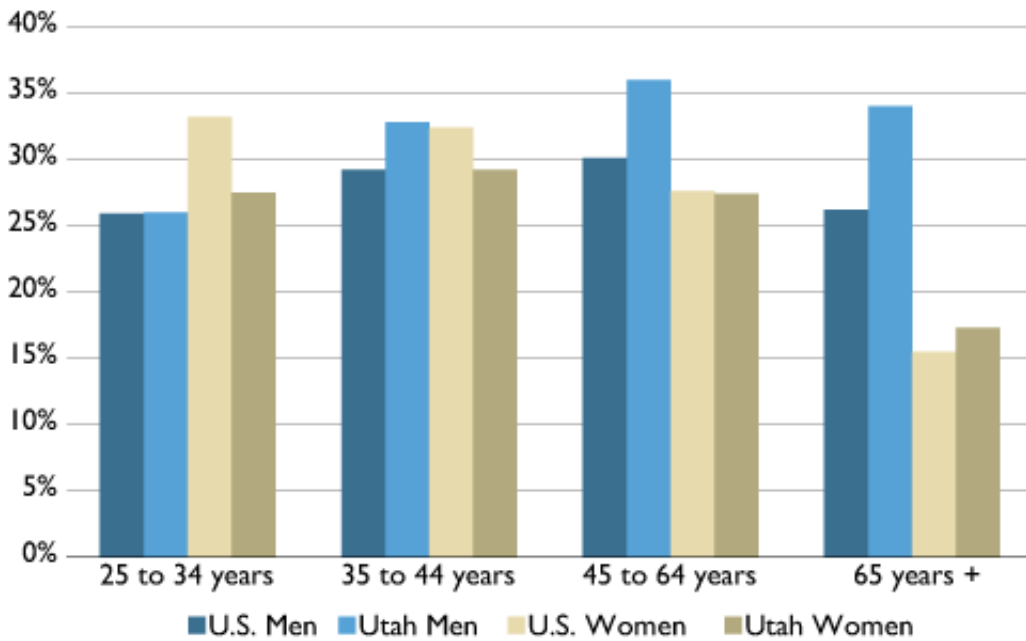
Source: Census.

Examining educational attainment of men and women separately, the data show that while Utah men exceed national averages, especially in the older age brackets, Utah women fall short of their national counterparts (see Figure 5). Utah women significantly fall behind U.S. women in degree attainment, particularly in the 25-34 and 35-44 year brackets. Therefore, even though a higher percent of Utah women ages 25-34 are receiving degrees than Utah men, they fall almost six percentage points below the national percent of U.S. women with a bachelor's degree or higher.

While a higher percent of young Utah women have received a bachelor's degree or higher since 2000, the level of young Utah men receiving such degrees has stayed the same. In 2000, the percent of Utah men ages 25-34 with a bachelor's degree or higher roughly equaled the national level, and this percent has not changed noticeably in Utah or nationally over the last eight years. The percent of Utah men with a bachelor's degree or higher in 2000 was 25.6% compared to 26% in 2008.[6]

The low-to-average level of educational attainment for Utah's young males and females 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 by limiting its ability to attract high paying employers and lowering its level of per capita income. A study from the Pew Center on the States shows that differences in college attainment rates statistically explain more than two-thirds of the variation in per capita income among states.[7] Harvard economist Ed Glaeser notes that as the share of adults in a metropolitan area with college degrees increases by 10%, the wages of a worker with a fixed education level increase by 8%. Glaeser also states that area level education seems to increase the production of innovations and speed of economic growth.[8]

Figure 5: Percent of Male and Female Age Groups With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher in 2008

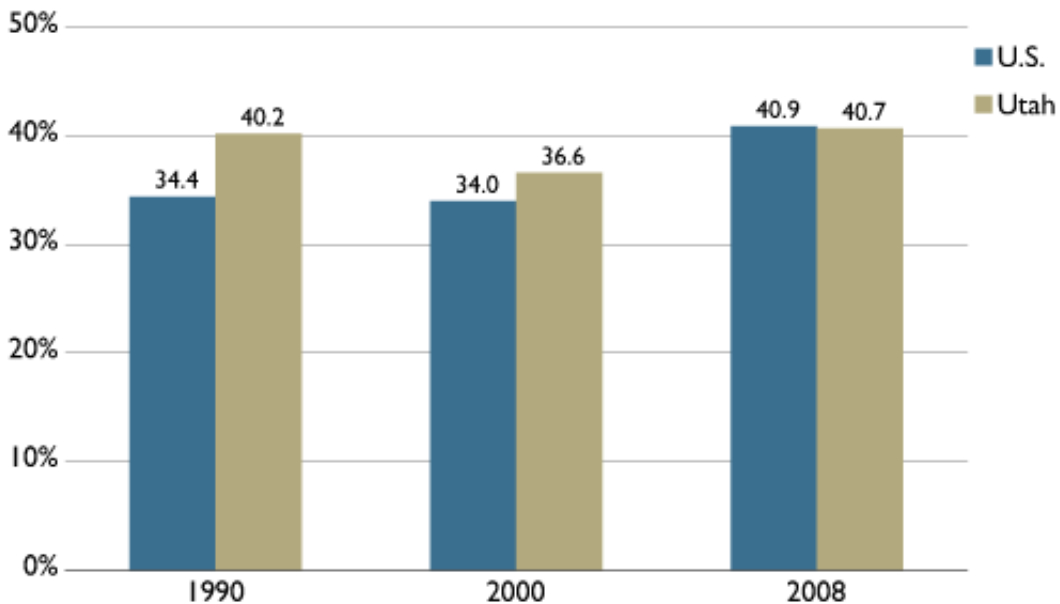


Source: Census.

Trends in College Enrollment

College enrollment data provide information on how the number of college graduates may change in the near future. College enrollment for ages 18-24 declined in both the U.S. and Utah between 1990 and 2000 (see Figure 6).^[9] By 2008, however, enrollment rates increased dramatically on both national and state levels. Utah enrollment rose from 36.6% in 2000 to 40.7% in 2008. Nationally, college enrollment increased from 34% in 2000 to 40.9% in 2008. Historically, Utah has enjoyed a higher percent of college enrollment compared to the national average, but since 1990 this gap has closed. Like educational attainment, it seems that Utah has not kept up with the increasing rate of enrollment nationally.

Figure 6: Percent of Adults 18 to 24 Attending College



Source: Census.

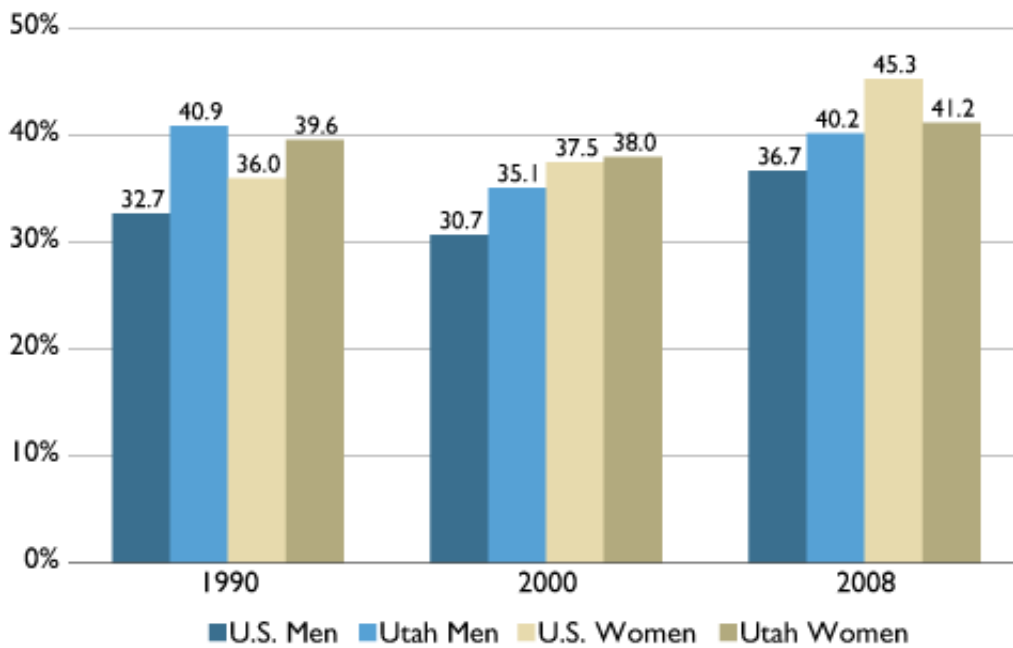
Utahns of both sexes exceeded the nation in college participation in 1990 and 2000, but in 2008, the percent of Utah women attending college was below the national average (see Figure 7). Although more Utah women

attended college in 2008 (41.2% compared to 38% in 2000), national enrollment rates have surpassed Utah's rates. In 2000, 37.5% of U.S. women attended college, and by 2008 that percent had increased to 45.3%. These data show the percent of young Utah women both enrolling in college and completing their degrees is now less than the national average. This trend is a change from the previous decade; from 1990-2000, the percent of young Utah women enrolling in college was higher than the national average. However, the percent of young women attaining degrees was, and has remained, lower (see Figure 9).

In 2000, Utah women enrolled in college at a higher rate than Utah men, but graduated at a rate lower than their male counterparts. This trend, however, has reversed for young women within the last seven years. Young Utah women now enroll and graduate at higher rates than Utah men in the same age bracket (see Figures 8 and 9).

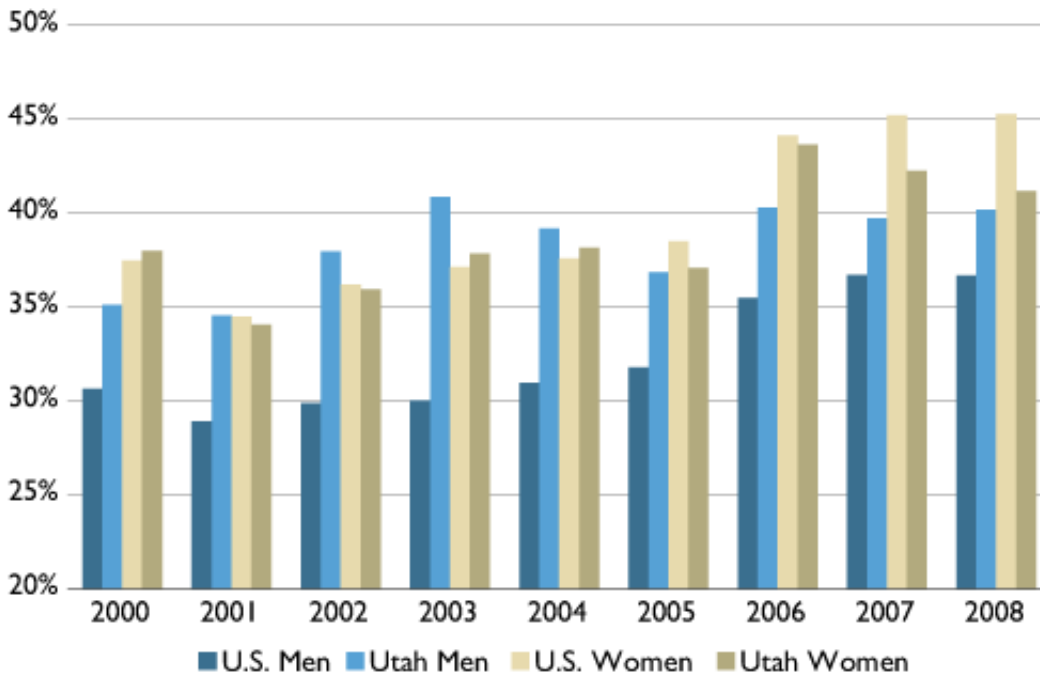
In 2008, the percent of Utah men enrolled in college still exceeded the national rate. However, the gap has been consistently closing since the 1990s. In 2000, 30.7% of U.S. men were enrolled in college, and by 2008, that percent increased to 36.7%. In Utah, 35.1% of the young men were enrolled in college in 2000, and in 2008, 40.2% were enrolled. The rate of growth in Utah men ages 18-24 enrolled in college has been slower than the national increase as other states are catching up to Utah.

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



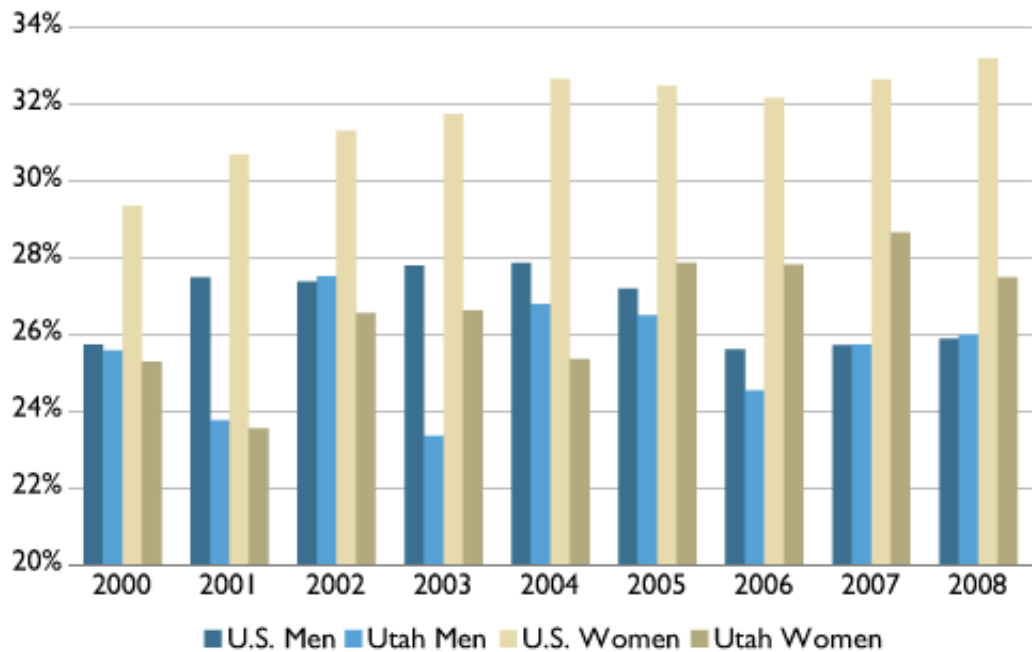
Source: Census.

Figure 8: Percent of Men and Women 18 to 24 Attending College



Source: Census.

Figure 9: Percent of Men and Women 25 to 34 With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher



Source: Census.

Conclusion

Recent data show Utah's national ranking in terms of educational attainment and college enrollment has been falling. While the percent of all Utah adults with a bachelor's degree or higher has clearly increased over time, the state's ranking has fallen as other states catch up to Utah's traditionally high levels of education. In addition, breaking the data out by age and gender shows that young Utah men have not made gains in educational attainment this decade; neither did young men nationally. Young Utah women have increased their education levels, but they are falling far behind the levels of education young women are achieving nationally. The clear trend nationally is that educational attainment increases are being driven by young women. In Utah, young women are following that trend but not at the same level or rate of growth.

This could be due to several factors, some of which include: First, a change in demographics influenced by immigration to the state of persons who have low education levels and whose children are less likely to finish high school as compared to the native born.[10] Second, Utah's rapid rate of economic growth during the 2000 to 2007 period which led to an increase in number of jobs that could be obtained without college education. Third, higher-education institutions implementing policies which encourage higher rates of college attendance and educational attainment, particularly for young women (as indicated by the surge in the national rates). For instance, some universities have made more of a concerted effort to market to young women, including arranging for enrolled women to make calls to prospective female students.[11] Regardless of the reasons, however, the data clearly show Utah is no longer a national leader in terms of the educational attainment of its young population. Recent reports of higher education enrollment indicate these trends may be reversing due to the recession; however, there is no current data available yet verifying whether Utah's education and enrollment rates in the past year have surpassed the national average.

Endnotes

[1] "Trends in Educational Attainment: U.S. Catching Up to Utah," Utah Foundation Research Brief (2006), http://www.utahfoundation.org/reports/?page_id=307 (accessed 1 July 2009).

[2] 1940-2000 rankings are available from Nicole S. Stoops, "A Half-Century of Learning: Historical Census Statistics on Education Attainment in the US, 1940-2000," U.S. Census Bureau, April 2006, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/introphct41.html> (accessed 12 June 2009).

[3] National rankings include all fifty states and Washington D.C.

[4] The 2000 data are from the decennial census, while 2001-2008 data come from the American Community Survey (ACS). The decennial census is a complete count of population, while the ACS is a survey, which estimates these figures with some sampling error. The margin of error in the ACS data can cause the annual numbers and rankings to vary from year to year; therefore, more emphasis should be placed on the overall trend rather than the annual changes in the rankings.

[5] U.S. Census Bureau.

[6] In 2000, the percent of U.S. men ages 25-34 years old with a bachelor's degree or higher was 25.7%. In 2008, it was 25.9%.

[7] "Got Talent?" *The Pew Center on the States Trends to Watch*, http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/trends_detail.aspx?id=31682 (accessed 27 October 2009).

[8] Edward L. Glaeser, "The Dream for a Human Capital Agenda," *The Boston Globe*, 5 September 2008, http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2008/09/05/the_dream_for_a_human_capital_agenda/ (accessed 27 October 2009).

[9] U.S. Census Bureau. 1990 enrollment data available from Pamela S. Perlich "Long-term Demographic Trends Impacting Higher Education in Utah," University of Utah Bureau of Economic and Business Research, May 2006, http://www.business.utah.edu/bebr/bebrFiles/2655_bebr_HighEdTrends.pdf (accessed 12 June 2009).

[10] Perlich.

[11] Andy Guess, "Enrollment Surge for Women," *Inside Higher Ed News*, 7 August 2007, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/08/07/enrollment#at> (accessed 27 October 2009).

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