

Educated for marriage: The difference college makes

by [Tim Stafford](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

After thousands of scientific studies of marriage, the one number everybody knows is 50 percent. Fifty percent of American marriages end in divorce. It's a statistic made for pessimism and fatalism, as in "Half of the people in this room will get a divorce." Adding to the woe is the wealth of research that has noted the severe economic and social impact of divorce on children. Children from divorced families experience poverty, struggle in school, get in trouble with the authorities and encounter other problems at higher rates than children from families whose parents stay married.

Another fact is less well known. As researchers have sliced and diced the data on marriage, they have found one group of Americans for whom marriage does not appear threatened. This group—about 25 percent of the population—has an already low divorce rate that has dropped by half in the past decade. People in this group rarely have babies outside of marriage. They tend to marry more than other Americans and to stay married.

This group is defined by one thing: a college education.

Approximately one-quarter of adult Americans have graduated from college. Their divorce rate after ten years of marriage, as reported by the *Economist*, plummeted to 16.5 percent by 2007, just over half what it was a decade ago. Only 4 percent of college-educated women have children outside of marriage. Whereas at one time college-educated women were less likely to marry than those with less education, now they are more likely.

On the other end of the scale, women who dropped out of high school have seen their ten-year divorce rate rise in the past decade, from 38 percent to 46 percent. For those who completed high school the ten-year divorce rate has also risen, though not as fast, to 38 percent.

The faithfulness of the college educated to marriage might seem counterintuitive to those who think of higher education as a secularizing force. However open-minded college graduates are about marriage, they don't act as though all choices are equal.

Why do the college-educated get this so much better than the rest of us? Surely the marital success of college graduates has little to do with what they learn in the classroom. The body of knowledge that a student gains in four years of college—whether in international relations, electrical engineering or journalism—has little relevance for keeping a marriage alive in the 21st century. One thing does reliably happen in college, however: a student gets four years older. Statistically, those who marry at 22 are more likely to stay married than those who marry at 18. Four years make a difference in brain development and personal maturity. Just putting off marriage for college is a plus.

Also, college graduates make more money than people who have graduated only from high school. Money is a major stress factor in marriage, so it makes sense that better incomes will lead to less stressful marriages.

This relationship with money is complex, however. Much of the data actually suggest that causation goes in the other direction—that successful marriages lead to better incomes. Single-parent families (headed by someone who either never married or got divorced) have a poverty rate five times that of two-parent biological families. Even stepfamilies experience poverty at almost double the rate of families with intact first marriages.

According to studies cited in the *Economist*, married men drink less, work harder and are less likely to take drugs. They earn substantially more than single men with similar education and job experience. A case can be made that marriage is the best financial tool we know—more potent even than education for helping people succeed.

Ultimately it's a fool's game to argue whether education, marriage or good jobs have the greatest effect in helping people. College, marriage and higher incomes all tend to go hand in hand, and it's hard to say what causes what. At the very least, college graduates can defer gratification (they do their homework) because they have been taught the value of self-discipline (usually by their married parents). This makes them successful in their careers, and it makes them successful in their marriages. A college education may make college graduates less moralistic about marriage, but it doesn't make them less practical. They see that marriage pays. They invest in it. And they know how to invest.

Kay Hymowitz, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, makes the case that every young person needs a personal life map. The old-fashioned one was simple and memorable: "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Mary with a baby carriage." Hymowitz says that the college-educated fiercely hold on to that map. They exert phenomenal energy in finding and securing the ideal partner; they put off marriage and children (if not sex) until they finish their education; they then marry and have children, whom they in turn supervise and train very carefully for success—education, homework, discipline, a wide understanding of the world, good relationships and a solid marriage.

Those with less education may be less pragmatic. They may not be as well equipped to act in a disciplined way. Perhaps they never learned to get their homework done. They are less likely to plan ahead and more prone to act on the basis of emotion.

These are generalizations, of course, with many exceptions on all sides. But education is more than sitting in class. Graduates succeed not merely because they have mastered a body of knowledge, but because they have, at least in part, mastered themselves.

When facing social problems, evangelical Christians like myself tend to emphasize morality and spirituality. Regarding marriage, we emphasize what we see as morally right—to love each other sacrificially, to not divorce. We also emphasize the spiritual transformations that enable us to do what is right—the "come to Jesus" that, we believe, can change marriage from an onerous burden to a joyful freedom.

Studies reveal that marriage requires more. American evangelicals are, on the whole, less educated than the general population. Not surprisingly, they have a high divorce rate, even though they are on average quite committed to the institution of marriage and to spiritual growth.

Faith and morality do matter. Studies show that a college graduate with an active faith is more likely to stay married than a nonbeliever or a nominal believer with a college education. An actively Christian high school dropout is more likely to stay married than an agnostic high school dropout. However, education makes considerably more difference in the divorce rate than faith does.