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RECENT DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS IN THE U.S. WORKING AGE COLLEGE EDUCATED POPULATION

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RECENT DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS IN THE U.S. WORKING AGE COLLEGE EDUCATED POPULATION¹

Abstract

Major workforce and workplace challenges undergird four forces shaping the size and composition of nation's future working age population—growing anti-immigrant sentiment, the long-standing sex ratio imbalance in post-secondary education, White male disenchantment with college, and the declining fortunes of college-educated Black females. Current Population Survey data are utilized to demonstrate the gravity of these forces on the U.S. college educated working age population over the past four years (2020-2024). Recommendations are offered to address the underlying, demographically driven human resource management challenges.

Introduction

The U.S. is experiencing an unprecedented demographic transformation, characterized by slowing total growth and impending absolute population decline—a first in the nation's history (Cameron, 2025; Williams, 2025; Kahloon, 2025; Eberstadt, 2025; Clark, 2024). Declining fertility, population aging, age-related mortality, premature deaths of despair, constraints imposed on international migration, and heightened deportation of immigrants are major contributors to this state-of-affairs (U.S. Department of State, 2025; Johnson, 2025; Sasson & Haywood, 2019; Case & Deaton, 2020; Wu, Strickler, Murphy, Chiwaya, & Ainsley, 2025).

The implications for the U.S. workforce, workplaces, and consumer markets are far-ranging. Most immediately, recent demographic shifts pose serious challenges for HR leaders and managers striving to recruit, retain, and sustain a viable and productive workforce (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a). Longer term, recent demographic shifts raise serious questions about our nation's ability to remain competitive and attractive as a place to live, work, play, and do business in an ever-changing and increasingly volatile global business environment (Johnson, 2025; Johnson, Bonds, Parnell, & Schlobohm, 2024; Shankar, 2025; Greenho, Mathema, & Barrientos-Ferrer, 2025).

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Among the forces shaping the nation's shifting demographics, four constitute immediate workforce and workplace challenges:

1. Growing anti-immigrant sentiment (U.S. Department of State, 2025; Cameron, 2025; Greenho, Mathema, & Barrientos-Ferrer, 2025; Shankar, 2025; Williams, 2025; Kahloon, 2025).
2. The longstanding sex ratio imbalance in higher education (Buchmann, Dwyer, & Yao, 2025; Hurst, 2024; Keiser, 2025).
3. White male—and especially working-class White male--disenchantment with college (The Feed, 2024; Fry, 2023; Miller, 2025; Belkin, 2021; Gardner, 2024; Donadel, 2023); and
4. Declining fortunes, health, and wellbeing of educated Black females, especially those employed in predominantly White work environments (Dawson, 2025; McCoy, 2023; Curry, 2019; Colin, Pinchak, & Barnett, 2020; Omowale, Mangnum, & Slatoon, 2022).

Our specific objective here is to demonstrate the gravity of these forces on the size and composition of the U.S. working age college educated population—those between the ages of 25 and 64. To do so, we draw on demographic change statistics from the 2020 and the 2024 Annual Economic and Social Supplement of the Current Population Survey and other sources of publicly available demographic data.

Defined for our purposes here as those with a 4-year college degree or higher, the college educated, as we show below, were responsible for nearly all of the absolute growth in the U.S. working age population (25-64) between 2020 and 2024. Aside from rapid growth, there is another reason to focus on this demographic.

Despite ongoing turbulence and uncertainty in U.S. institutions, and notwithstanding the growing use of AI to perform various functions in organizations, individuals with four-year college degrees arguably will remain the most sought-after talent in most sectors of the economy for the near future, particularly if higher education institutions take proactive steps to upgrade the business and professional communication skills and acumen of graduates (Mahin & Johnson, 2025).

Accordingly, we conclude by highlighting key workforce and workplace strategies, policies, procedures, and practices that must be pursued to maintain a competitive college educated workforce with the requisite skills to meet employers' needs in a highly volatile and ever-changing global marketplace.

Recent Demographic Change

Between 2020 and 2024, as Table 1 shows, the U.S. college-educated population, as defined in this research, increased by 4.8% (3.1 million), outpacing the rates of growth for both the total working age population (1.3% or 2.1 million) and the working age population with no college (1.4% or 843,000), and contrasting the experience of the working age population with some college or an associate's degree which declined by -4.1% (-1.8 million). But these data mask significant changes in both the composition and employment experiences of the nation's four year or higher college educated population.

Table 1: Absolute & Percent Change in the U.S. Working Age Population by Level of Educational Attainment, 2020-2024.
(in Thousands)

Working Age Population	2024 Absolute Number	2020-2024 Absolute Change	2020-2024 Percent Change
All	170,550	2,134	1.3
No College	59,646	837	1.4
Some College or Associate's Degree	41,983	-1,761	-4.1
4 Year Degree or Higher	68,951	3,149	4.8

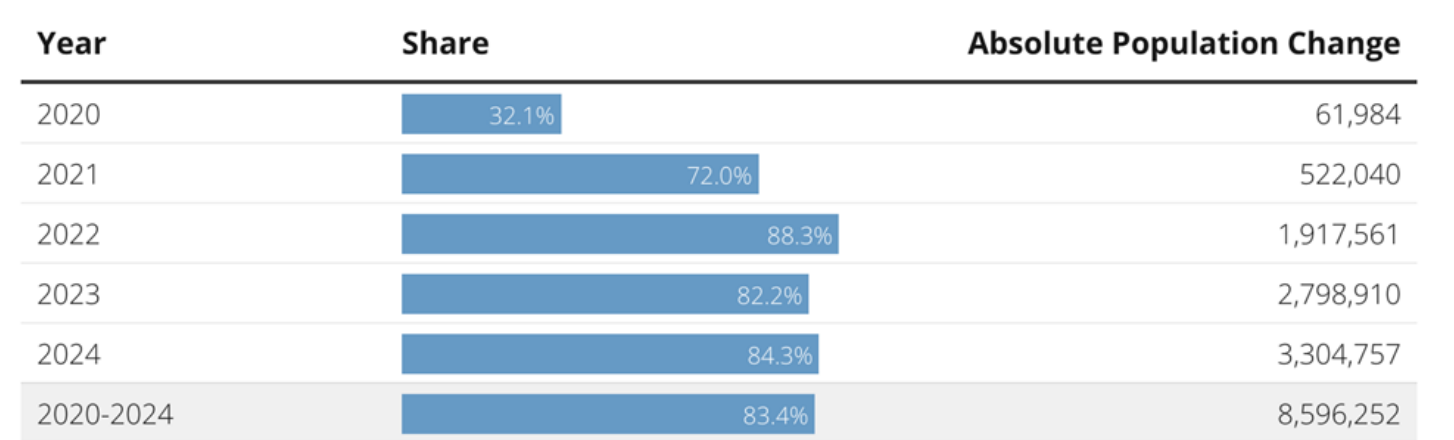
Source: Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2020 & 2024.

Immigration Driven Growth & Compositional Change

Over the past six decades, immigration and immigrants—mainly from Asia, Central and Latin America, and the Middle East--have driven U.S. population growth, thanks to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known

as Hart-Cellar Act)—a more liberal immigrant origins policy which was implemented coincident with a host of civil rights laws enacted in the mid-1960s to promote racial equality in domestic life (U.S. House of Representatives, 1965). Between 2020 and 2024, for example, international migration was responsible for 83 percent of the nation’s net growth, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: International Migration as a Share of U.S. Net Population Growth, 2020-2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, June 2025.

Further, immigration driven population change, combined with slowing and more recently non-Hispanic white population loss (-7.2 million since 2020), has transformed the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population, including the college-educated population (Johnson, 2025). As Table 2 shows, people of color—in this instance, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and members of other non-White groups—were responsible for 83 percent of the net growth in the college educated population between 2020 and 2024, according to the Current Population Survey data. College educated non-Hispanic Whites were responsible for only 17 percent of the net growth during this period.

Table 2: Shares of Net Working Age College Educated Population Growth by Race/Ethnicity, 2020-2024

Race/Ethnicity	Absolute Change	Share of Absolute Change
All Races	3,154	100.0
White	547	17.3
Black	626	19.8
Hispanic	1,187	37.6
Asian	636	8.4
Other	158	5.0

Source: Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2020 and 2024.

These data raise serious concerns about recent efforts to curtail immigration, especially of talented international students seeking degrees from U.S. higher education institutions and other highly skilled foreign talent entering the U.S. on work visas (Yao, 2025; U.S. Department of Labor, 2025; Greenho, Mathema, & Barrientos-Ferrer, 2025). Similarly, efforts to dismantle DEI initiatives seem unwise when the nation’s workforce is becoming increasingly more diverse—racially, ethnically, and culturally--a trend popularly referred to as the “browning” of America (Johnson, Bonds, Parnell, & Schlobohm, 2024).

The College Enrollment Conundrum

Constituting yet another workforce and workplace challenge, college enrollment has hovered around 60 percent female and 40 percent male for more than four decades, while the sex ratio at birth is approximately 50/50 (Evers, Livernois, & Mancuso, 2006). The college enrollment sex ratio imbalance is evident in all types of post-secondary institutions—two-year, four-year, PWIs, HBCUs, & MSIs—and, as shown in Table 3, in higher education institutions in every region of the U.S.

Table 3: Number of Students Enrolled in Post-Secondary Institutions by Region & Gender, 2023

Region	Total Enrollment	Male Enrollment	Percent Male
All Regions	19,427,907	8,216,910	42
New England	1,105,112	450,720	41
Mid-East	2,702,522	1,163,211	43
Great Lakes	2,589,208	1,113,793	43
Plains	1,372,898	569,238	41
Southeast	4,636,644	1,914,072	41
Southwest	2,618,608	1,074,532	41
Rocky Mountains	1,030,522	449,440	44
Far West	3,357,254	1,470,887	44

Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Further, as you would expect, the sex ratio imbalance in college enrollment also is reflected in the graduation statistics, as Table 4 shows (Hurst, 2024). In 2023, U.S. higher education institutions granted 943,000 more degrees to women than to men, a ratio of 1.5 female degrees granted for every 1.0 male degree granted.

Table 4: Number of Degrees Awarded in Post-Secondary Institutions by Region & Gender, 2023

Region	Total Degrees Awarded	Female Degrees Awarded	Male Degrees Awarded	Female-Male Absolute Degree Difference
All Regions	4,737,195	2,840,212	1,896,983	943,229
New England	277,311	164,597	112,714	51,883
Mid-East	693,486	412,064	281,422	130,642
Great Lakes	664,059	390,655	273,404	117,251
Plains	328,636	199,565	129,071	70,494
Southeast	1,180,699	710,713	469,986	240,727
Southwest	608,651	369,733	238,918	130,815
Rocky Mountains	241,205	146,041	95,164	50,877
Far West	736,737	445,912	293,825	151,687

Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Consistent with this trend, as Table 5 shows, females accounted for 60 percent and males were responsible for 40 percent of the net growth in the U.S. college educated population over the past four years. In workplaces, this means that U.S. employers and their executives, HR leaders and managers will have to go to great lengths to accommodate an increasingly female dominated workforce to remain competitive in the years ahead.

Table 5: Shares of Net College Educated Working Age Population Change by Sex, 2020-2024

Sex	Absolute Change	Share of Total Change
Both Sexes	3,149	100.0
Male	1,252	40.0
Female	1,897	60.0

Source: Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2020 and 2024.

White Male & Black Female Challenges

The sex ratio imbalance statistics in Tables 4 and 5 mask other troubling demographic trends with significant workforce and workplace implications. Here we focus on the challenges faced by two demographic subgroups of the college educated population: White males and Black females.

Table 6 highlights U.S. college educated population change by sex and level of educational attainment, with a specific emphasis on males generally and white males particularly. It shows that the male college educated population grew by 4.1 percent and as previously noted, was responsible for forty percent (1.2 million) of the absolute growth in the U.S. college educated population over the past four years (3.1 million).

Disaggregated by race, the Current Population Survey data reveal that the college educated White male population grew by a paltry 1.4 percent between 2020 and 2024, which is consistent with the notion that a whole generation of American males have given up on college (Belkin, 2021). In absolute numbers (300,000), White males accounted for less than one quarter (24%) of the net growth of the college educated male population (1.2 million)--and less than ten percent of the growth in the college educated population in the aggregate (3.1 million)--during this period. What this means is that college educated males of color—Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and members of other non-White groups—were responsible for most of the net gain in the college educated male population over the past four years, consistent with the browning of America thesis (Johnson, 2025).

Making matters worse, as Table 6 shows, the White male population experienced decline at all other levels of education attainment during this period, including at the high school or less, some college, and associate degree levels. For a seamless and more balanced school to work pipeline moving forward, this means the K-20 education system will have to devise more effective policies and practices to improve male college enrollment, matriculation, and graduation rates, especially for White males. Failure to do so has enormous implications not only for the future composition of the workforce, but also marriage, family formation, homeownership, community stability, and wealth accumulation, which shape the health and wellbeing of our nation (Eberstadt, 2025; Clark, 2024; Buchmann, Dwyer, & Yao, 2025; Johnson, 2025).

Table 6: Absolute and Percent Change in Working Age Population by Sex and Level of Educational Attainment, 2020-2024 (absolute numbers in thousands).

Both Sexes		
Educational Attainment	Percent Change	Absolute Change
All Levels	1.3	2,143
High School or Less	1.4	837
Some College or Associate's Degree	-4.0	-1,761
4 Year Degree or Higher	4.8	3,149
All Males		
Educational Attainment	Percent Change	Absolute Change
All Levels	2.4	2,017
High School or Less	2.5	812
Some College or Associate's Degree	-1.2	-251
4 Year Degree or Higher	4.1	1,252
White Males		
Educational Attainment	Percent Change	Absolute Change
All Levels	-1.2	-583
High School or Less	-2.4	-386
Some College or Associate's Degree	-3.8	-505
4 Year Degree or Higher	1.4	300

Source: Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2020 & 2024.

Table 7 highlights college educated female population change by race. It shows that Black females were responsible for one fifth of the absolute growth in the college educated female population between 2020 and 2024. College educated Black women ranked second behind college educated Hispanic women, who accounted for almost half the net growth (45%), and above college educated Asian and non-Hispanic White women, who were responsible for 18% and 14% of absolute growth, respectively. And while the population of all college educated women increased by 4.7 percent, the college educated Black female population increased by 9.2 percent between 2020 and 2024.

However, in contrast to other college educated women, and despite this rapid growth and reportedly some of the highest labor force participation rates in the country (Cooper & Opoku-Agyeman, 2025), Black women have experienced the brunt of recent job loss in the U.S. economy (Velshi, 2025). Between August and September of this year, for example, the unemployment rate for Black women increased more rapidly (from 6.7% to 7.5%) than the unemployment rate for white women (from 3.2% to 3.4%), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. More than 300,000 Black women exited the labor market during this period.

Table 7: Absolute and Percent Change in the College Educated Female Population by Race, 2020-2024

Race/Ethnicity	2024 Population	2020-2024 Absolute Change	2020-2024 Percent Change	Share of Total Growth
All Races	37,297	1,692	4.7	100.0
Non-Hispanic White	23,989	244	1.0	14.4
Black	4,292	361	9.2	21.3
Hispanic	4,250	766	22.0	45.2
Asian	4,240	306	7.8	18.1

Source: Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2020 and 2024.

Two explanations have been advanced for the sharp uptick in Black female unemployment. The first is that the disproportionate concentration of less than college educated Black women in “volatile sectors like retail and hospitality makes them ‘canaries in the coal mine’ in the current economic downturn” (Cooper and Opoku-Agyeman, 2025). The second is that the downsizing of federal government departments and agencies as well as the dismantling of DEI programs and equity focused initiatives in both public institutions and private sector organizations have disproportionately impacted college educated and professional Black women (Haider & Mason, 2025).

While plausible, the veracity of these arguments must await future releases of data from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the meantime, a substantial body of prior research offers insights into a set of longstanding challenges that will require major workforce and workplace accommodations to ensure college educated and professional Black women are able to successfully compete in the U.S. labor market moving forward (Sasson & Haywood, 2019; McCoy, 2023; Colen, Pinchak & Barnett, 2020; Omowale, Mangum, & Slatton, 2024; Okoji, 2022; Riley Johnson, 2024).

Studies confirm that balancing multiple societal roles (e.g., as sole or primary household breadwinner, motherhood, and/or caretaker for aging family members) while simultaneously navigating competitive workplace dynamics exact an especially heavy toll on the health and wellbeing of Black women (Riley Johnson, 2024). Often, the agency necessary to meet and exceed performance expectations is not fully available to professional Black women in work environments (COQUAL, 2019). And the negative health outcomes of these barriers and constraints are alarming.

Among the U.S. female population, Black women experience health issues earlier in life than women of other race/ethnic backgrounds and on average are 7.5 years older biologically than White women 49-55 years of age; carry the highest mortality for all cancers combined; bear the greatest burden of hypertension, stroke, heart failure, and coronary artery disease; and four out of five are obese or overweight (CDC, 2022; Chinn et al, 2021; Kanchi et al, 2018; Ebonig & Breathett, 2020). Further, and most disconcerting, research confirms these disparities hold true irrespective of Black women's socio-economic status, meaning advanced levels of educational attainment, well-paying jobs with benefits, and residing in "safe" neighborhoods or zip codes do not protect the health of Black women (Garovic & Kattah, 2022; Assari, Lapeyrou, & Neighbors, 2018).

Simply put, Blacks and Whites do not share the same health benefits of advanced education and increased incomes. In fact, research on the self-reported health status of various demographic groups has demonstrated statistically that Blacks experience "diminished returns" from advanced education, which exacerbates health gaps for a population that is already significantly predisposed to health risk (Assari & Zare, 2024; Assari et al, 2018).

Emblematic of this reality, the Pregnancy Related Mortality Ratio (PMPR) is 5.2 times higher for college educated Black women than their college-educated White counterparts (Petersen, et al, 2019; also see, Hill, Rao, Artiga, & Ranji, 2025; St. Catherine University, 2021). As declared by the CDC and confirmed by other research, these disparities are not solely due to behavioral or biological differences but stem from systemic issues, including historical devaluation of Black bodies and implicit racial bias in health care (see, for example, Wamsley, 2021; Macias-Konstantopoulous, et al, 2023).

Making matters worse, bias does not just reside in healthcare. It also is endemic to many workplace cultures, as revealed in a recent exploratory study of what it is like to be Black in corporate America and other work environments (COQUAL, 2019). Among the study's key findings:

- Black women (16%) were more likely than White women (2%) to feel someone of their race would never achieve a top position at their company.
- Black women (69%) were more like than White women (16%) to feel Black employees have to work harder to advance.
- Black women (35%) were more likely than White women (20%) to believe people at their workplaces are afraid to address bias when it occurs.

Conversely, the study revealed that:

- Black women (30%) were less likely than White women (40%) to have access to senior leaders at work.
- Black women (35%) were less likely than White women (41%) to report managers that give them growth opportunities.

When combined with the often-repetitive cycle of proving value by taking on high risk, high stress assignments, these attitudes create unparalleled obstacles to success and advancement (Saunders & Hyter, 2019).

Research confirms that these conditions often diminish Black women's ambitions for upward mobility in organizations (Lui, 2025). And the absence of appropriate accommodations often undergird professional Black women's exits from U.S. workplaces-- and in some instances, from the workforce altogether (Riley Johnson, 2024).

Sometimes the exits are voluntary. In the COQUAL (2019) study, for example, Black women (36%) were more likely than White women (27%) to express intentions to leave their current company within two years. In other instances, the exits are involuntary; that is, professional Black women are forced to leave for alleged poor performance when in reality their ability to perform at a high level is severely limited or constrained by a host of personal and/or household challenges as well as work-related health issues that may not be evident or visible in routine workplace interactions (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025b).

Concluding Thoughts & Recommendations

As a nation, we are at a critical inflection point demographically (Johnson, 2025). Without continued immigration, the U.S. population—after growing at a slower rate in every decade since 1960, is projected enter a phase of extended absolute decline without continued immigration. This will adversely impact all aspects of American society, including the workforce, workplaces, and consumer markets.

Several critical steps are required to maintain U.S. competitiveness:

First, we must recognize the pivotal role that immigration and immigrants must continue to play in the U.S. economy given declining fertility, premature deaths of despair, and aging-related mortality among the native-born population. A fair and just immigration policy is a strategic imperative for the nation's future growth and prosperity (Greenho, Mathema, & Barriento-Ferrer, 2025; Johnson, 2025).

Second, rather than dismantling DEI programs, we must acknowledge and embrace the competitive advantage that our immigration-driven population diversity affords us in the global marketplace (Johnson, Bonds, Parnell, & Schlobohm, 2024). Research confirms our diversity enhances creativity and the nation's innovation capacity (Kwapis, 2025; Sorsenson, 2023; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013; Entezurkheir & Moshiri, 2025).

Third, and more broadly, the challenges that college educated White males and Black females face accentuate the urgent need for an all-hands-on deck approach to successfully nurture, grow, and develop the U.S. workforce of the future (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a). Two recommendations are offered here.

To reduce health disparities among women, the U.S. health care system and its providers must demonstrate a much higher level of sensitivity and unwavering commitment to specifically addressing the unique health care needs of Black women. That includes having culturally competent staff with the active listening skills to “hear” and “respond” to the expressed concerns and needs of Black female patients (Riley Johnson, 2024). Additionally, employers must challenge the myth of meritocracy and hold leaders accountable for creating inclusive environments where trust and respect permeate (COQUAL, 2019). Similarly, more purposeful, and intentional strategies are needed to address the mental and physical health issues and other concerns that research shows undergird the long-term decline in male college enrollment (Mowreader, 2025; Miller, 2025; Pasquini, 2025).

More broadly, given the impact of ongoing turbulence and uncertainty on U.S. individuals and households, government, K-20 education system, and other public and private sector leaders should mandate that their organizations conduct pulse surveys like the Census Bureau’s monthly Household Trends and Outlook Pulse Survey (HTOPS), which is designed “to efficiently collect data on emerging social and economic matters facing U.S. households” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). At the organization or firm level, the pulse survey should be designed to identify and monitor on an ongoing basis barriers, constraints, and challenges that affect morale and performance in school, on the job, and in other walks of life.

Such surveys, as we have explained elsewhere (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a), are necessary because many of the challenges that individuals in the school-to-work pipeline face or experience fall into a category we define as iceberg demographics.

That is, like the 90 percent of a freshwater iceberg that is below the water line, many of the forces that shape or affect morale, behavior, and performance in school or on the job may not be visibly apparent or evident in routine encounters.

Often misconstrued as signs of disinterest, disengagement, or incompetence (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a), iceberg demographic barriers to education and learning as well as work can exist at the person-level (e.g., cognitive impairments and autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis and lupus) or the household level (e.g., food insecurity and/or threats of eviction or foreclosure) (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a,b,c). In the current era of ongoing turbulence and uncertainty, pulse surveys will enable organizations to not only assess the frequency of such barriers and constraints. They also will afford organizations the opportunity to demonstrate empathy and compassion by developing and implementing accommodation policies, programs, practices, and procedures that are responsive to constituent needs (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025c).

Properly executed, pulse surveys can lead to data-driven school to work human resource management strategies and policies that improve health and well-being, enhance education outcomes, increase labor force participation, and reduce worker turnover, that is, quits and terminations (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a,b,c,d).

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