

# Want to Be Happily Married? Go to College.

**New research shows women with degrees are luckier in love.**

By **Pat Wingert** and **Barbara Kantrowitz** | Newsweek Web Exclusive  
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There was a time, not that long ago, when women were considered smart if they played dumb to get a man and women who went to college were more interested in getting a "Mrs. degree" than a bachelor's. Even today, it's not unusual for a woman to get whispered and unsolicited counsel from her grandmother that an advanced degree could hurt her in the marriage market. Despite the fact that more women than men now attend college, the idea that smart women finish last in love seems to hang on and on.

"There were so many misperceptions out there about education and marriage that I decided to sort out the facts," said economist Betsey Stevenson, an assistant professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. So along with Wharton colleague Adam Isen, Stevenson crunched national marriage data from 1950 to 2008 and found that the marriage penalty women once paid for being well educated has largely disappeared. "Marriage rates in the U.S. for college-educated women have risen enormously since the 1950s," Stevenson said. "In 1950, less than three quarters of white college-educated women went on to marry by age 40 [compared with 90 percent of high-school graduates]. But today, 86 percent marry by age 40, compared with 88 percent of high-school grads."

"In other words, the difference in marriage rates between those with college degrees and those without is miniscule," said Stephanie Coontz, a family historian at Evergreen State College and author of *Marriage: A History*. The new analysis (detailed in a briefing paper **released last week** by the Council on Contemporary Families) also found that while high-school dropouts had the highest marriage rates (93 percent) in the 1950s, today college-educated women are much more likely to marry than those who don't finish high school (86 percent versus 81 percent).

Of course, expectations have changed dramatically in the last half century. "In the 1950s, a lot of women thought they needed to marry right away," Coontz said. "Real wages were rising so quickly that men in their



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20s could afford to marry early. But they didn't want a woman who was their equal; they wanted a woman who looked up to the man. Men needed and wanted someone who knew less." In fact, she said, **research published by sociologist Mirra Komarovsky in 1946** documented that 40 percent of college women admitted to playing dumb on dates. "These days, few women feel the need to play down their intelligence or achievements," Coontz said.

The new research has more good news for college grads. Stevenson said the data indicate that modern college-educated women are more likely than other groups of women to be married at age 40, are less likely to divorce, and are more likely to describe their marriages as "happy" (no matter what their income) compared with other women. The marriages of well-educated women tend to be more stable because the brides are usually older as well as wiser, Stevenson said. Researchers have long known that the older people are when they marry, the more likely that the marriage will last. "When a man with only a high school degree marries by age 20, there's a 49 percent chance that he will be divorced within 10 years," she said. "Compare that with the man who gets married in his mid-30s who has a college degree. Ninety percent will still be married 10 years later."

College-educated couples are also more likely to marry for companionship and love and compatibility rather than for financial security. "These couples have different expectations," Stevenson said. "Among college graduates [today], only 6 percent say that financial security is the most important reason to marry, compared with 20 percent of those without a college degree." Better-educated couples, she said, "tend to think of themselves as equal partners." That's another big change from the past, Coontz said. "For women, financial stability used to be the most important reason for marriage," she said. "Today, educated women are a lot less concerned about how much their husband earns," she said, and more interested in whether "he is willing to share child care and housework."

Over the last half century, more women and men have been putting off marriage, and the group of women who have never been married at age 40 has grown over time. But even among this group, Stevenson said, college grads who want to get married eventually have an advantage because they are "twice as likely to marry in the next 10 years" as unmarried 40-year-olds with just a high-school degree.

The data also point to significant racial differences. While white women with college degrees are slightly less likely to marry than their less-educated sisters, a different scenario emerges among African-American women. Today, 70 percent of black college-educated women marry by age 40, compared with 53 percent of those who never finished high school. In the 1950s, black college-educated women were much less likely to marry than those with less education. "What all this tells me is that our perceptions lag behind the reality of our time," Stevenson said. "College-educated women have been closing the gap very steadily."

So if you're looking for another reason to encourage a young woman to get her college degree, add this one to the list: chances are, you'll be luckier in love.

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