

UWLP Statewide Research Shows How Higher Education Shapes Views of Utah's Workplaces

Susan R. Madsen and Julene Reese

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Graduation photo

courtesy of Utah State University

The Utah State University [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) (UWLP) released a new research and policy brief, [The Power of Education: How Higher Education Shapes Utah Workplaces](#), offering a comprehensive analysis of how educational attainment influences Utahns' views on workplace culture, opportunity, and equality.

Drawing on data from the UWLP's third annual statewide survey, completed by more than 5,200 Utahns, the report reveals a consistent pattern that education changes how people see the workplace. Across all eight workplace-related areas of A Bolder Way Forward (a UWLP initiative that strives to help Utah girls, women, and families thrive), higher levels of education were associated with greater awareness of workplace challenges, stronger recognition of inequities, and clearer expectations for fairness, transparency, and supportive organizational practices.

"Education does more than prepare people for jobs – it expands how they understand the world," said Susan R. Madsen, founding director of UWLP and co-author of the report. "As Utahns pursue higher levels of education, their expectations for workplace culture, advancement, and accountability rise. This has major implications for employers and policymakers across the state."

The report highlights eight statewide trends based on the data.

1. **Workplace Culture:** Respondents with bachelor's and graduate degrees reported stronger feelings of belonging at work and greater access to family-friendly policies and advancement opportunities. Eric Dahlin, co-author of the report and professor of sociology at Brigham Young University, said that people with higher levels of education are more likely to report supportive workplace cultures, stronger workplace connections, and greater opportunities for advancement.
2. **Childcare & Pre-K Programs:** Support for childcare as a critical workforce issue increased sharply with education. Those with graduate degrees rated childcare as a major issue at 6.3 (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree), compared to a rating of 5 among respondents with a high school education or less. However, most agreed it must be addressed.
3. **Gender Pay Gap:** Recognition of the gender pay gap increased with education for all, while the belief that the gap results from women's personal choices declined. Highly educated women were the least likely to attribute pay differences to personal decisions.
4. **Sexual Harassment & Discrimination:** Education heightened awareness of workplace discrimination and reduced the belief that harassment concerns are exaggerated. At the same time, trust that organizations will respond appropriately to harassment reports declined as education increased. This was a striking finding in the research.
5. **Leadership Development:** Respondents with higher education levels expressed stronger leadership aspirations, greater confidence, and more access to leadership opportunities for both women and men.
6. **Workforce Development:** Higher educational attainment strengthened optimism about employability, access to job resources, and confidence in future employment opportunities.
7. **Entrepreneurship:** Education influenced perceptions of support and available resources for entrepreneurship, but not for the entrepreneurial ambition itself or confidence that the startup would grow large enough to employ others.
8. **STEM:** Respondents with more education were less likely to believe that STEM careers are more difficult than jobs in other industries, but as education increased, respondents were

somewhat less likely to believe that STEM fields are welcoming to women.

Gender Gaps

The brief also reveals that education shifts women's perceptions far more than men's, widening gender gaps in views about discrimination, harassment, and workplace inequality. Even among the most educated respondents, women consistently reported fewer opportunities for advancement and lower trust in organizational responses to workplace problems.

"These disparities underscore a central insight that education elevates awareness, but structures determine outcomes," Madsen said.

Policy Implications for Utah

The report outlines policy implications for strengthening Utah's workforce and improving workplace equity, including:

- Increasing transparency and accountability in promotion pathways
- Investing in family-friendly workplace policies
- Prioritizing trust-building and consistent organizational follow-through
- Pairing workforce development with structural reforms
- Implementing targeted, gender-responsive strategies to reduce persistent disparities

"As Utah continues to navigate workforce needs, rapid economic change, and ongoing gender disparities, these findings offer a roadmap for employers and policymakers," Madsen said. "Education is a powerful force, but it must be paired with organizational and policy reforms to bring about outcomes that benefit everyone."

The [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) strengthens the impact of Utah girls and women through research, resources, and statewide engagement. Its premier initiative – [A Bolder Way Forward](#) – creates opportunities for Utahns to learn, collaborate, and drive meaningful change across 18 areas of focus. For more information, visit the UWLP website at utwomen.org. The UWLP is affiliated with [USU Extension](#).

Contact

Susan R. Madsen
Susan.Madsen@usu.edu

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