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State abortion laws impact students' choice of university

Nathan M Greenfield 25 April 2023

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Almost three-quarters (72%) of American college and university students report that they factor the reproductive health laws in the state in which their schools are located into their decisions about whether to remain at their college or university, according to a new study conducted by the Lumina Foundation in conjunction with the Gallup organisation.

A smaller percentage, 60%, of unenrolled 18- to 59-year-olds say they would take into account the state's abortion laws were they to apply to a college or university.

The **study** was released on 20 April – at a time of rising tension on the abortion issue, with increasing numbers of states adopting anti-abortion legislation in the wake of the June 2022 Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruling in the case of *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization* that reversed the *Roe v Wade* precedent protecting abortion rights throughout the country.

Republican governor Ron DeSantis' signing of a bill on 15 April made Florida the 18th state to either ban or severely limit access to abortion since last June. On 21 April North Dakota became the 19th state, adopting one of the strictest anti-abortion laws in the country, including a ban on the procedure throughout pregnancy, with a few exceptions in the first six weeks.

On the same day, the Supreme Court decided to stay a Federal Appeals Court's restriction on the use of the abortion pill Mifepristone, which is used for more than half of the abortions in the US. This will allow Mifepristone to continue to be used as the original case makes its way through the courts.

What the study means

Professor Brandon Crawford, who teaches in the Applied Health Department of Indiana University (IU, Bloomington) and has been tracking abortion attitudes over time, said: "What I think is important about this [Gallup-Lumina] study is that for a long time ... abortion attitudes ... have been relatively stable. People show support for abortion in some scenarios and they are opposed in others.

"Until the SCOTUS decision in *Dobbs*, abortion was legal in every state up to a certain point in the pregnancy. There's not that floor anymore. So now there's a huge variability in terms of how soon states can start restricting access to abortion.

"What this study is showing is that access to abortion is now something else that people are going to think about when they consider where to go to college. If you're thinking about going to college and reproductive services are valuable to you, or even the possibility you might need them, it may make you less inclined to enrol there," said Crawford.

Trigger laws

Following the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, in a number of states so-called 'trigger laws' automatically came into effect limiting access to abortion or banning it completely.

Wisconsin's trigger law, for example, reinstated a law, banning abortion for any reason, that dates to 1848, the year the US defeated Mexico in the Mexican War (1847-1848) and annexed the territories that became the states of New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California and Texas.

Other states quickly passed laws, some banning abortion entirely, some allowing exceptions for rape and or incest, while others, in an attempt to get around legal challenges at the state level, passed laws giving other citizens the right to sue a woman who has had an abortion or the doctor who performed it.

As *University World News* reported on 4 November 2022, the first published survey that showed the effect of erasing the nationwide right to abortion and returning the issue to state governments was published by Kaplan, a global educational services company that, in addition to offering Medical College Admission Test prep courses, provides admissions consulting to guide pre-medical students throughout the application process.

In its survey of 300 aspiring pre-med students, Kaplan found that nearly half said that their decision on where to apply to medical school would, either definitely or probably, be affected by the reproductive laws in the various states.

"I refuse to apply to any medical schools in states where women don't have rights to their bodies. I want a quality education that is going to let me grow and develop," wrote one pre-medical student on the survey. "I don't want to be given a sub-par education because the law refuses to give women rights," wrote another student who answered the survey.

The Kaplan study also found that almost a third said that access to abortion might or might not affect their decisions. 9% said it would not affect their decisions.

According to Edwin van Rest, Studyportals founder and CEO, during the Trump era they "saw that conservative measures had the largest impact on US students' interests, particularly their desire to study overseas and, most notably, in Canada".

Based in Holland, Studyportals is an online university search and application service.

Given the intense media focus across the United States on growing legal restrictions on abortion in a number of states, it is not unreasonable to expect a similar reaction. However, Studyportals University Marketing Director Caroline Souvestre noted, "[a]t this stage, our data is not showing an impact" of the changing legal regimen surrounding abortion.

A larger study

The Gallup-Lumina figures on the importance of states' reproductive laws come from a much larger study that will be published in May. The larger study is an online survey of 6,008 college and university students, 3,004 stopped-out adults (that is, college or university students who did not graduate) and 3,003 adults with no university or college experience.

"It's a nationally representative sample, ensuring that we have sufficient responses by gender, race, ethnicity, age and party affiliation to be able to report on disaggregations," said Courtney Brown, PhD, vice-president of impact and planning for Lumina Foundation, an independent private foundation in Indianapolis (Indiana) that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all.

"Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy," said Tracy Chen, Lumina's director of media strategy, in an email.

The Gallup-Lumina survey provides granular information. Of the 72% of enrolled students who say reproductive rights are important to their decision of whether to stay at their college or university, 81% favour greater access to abortion.

Eighty-six per cent of women currently in college or university favoured going to college and university in states with liberal abortion laws as did 74% of the men. Three-quarters of older students (25 to 59 years old) favoured states with more liberal laws as did 83% of the traditional college and university-age cohort (18 to 24-year-olds).

The figures for unenrolled people who say they are more likely to enrol in a college or university in a state with greater access to abortion average about five percentage points higher than do the figures for currently enrolled students.

Democrats vs Republicans?

Given the Democratic Party's support for a woman's right to choose, it is hardly surprising that almost 86% of students who identify as Democrats prefer to study in states with liberal abortion laws. By contrast, students who identify with the Republican Party do not align with their party's national figures such as DeSantis, or Senator Lindsay Graham (South Carolina) who has proposed a federal law that would ban all abortions after 15 weeks: 65% say they are more likely to go to college or university in a state with liberal abortion laws.

"One of our most important findings is that across every subgroup that we looked at – gender, age, party identification – the majority of people say that they are more likely to enrol or stay enrolled in a college if it is located in a state with greater access to reproductive health, the overwhelming majority," said Brown.

"People try to make this a political issue: Republicans versus Democrats. But you can see in the data that while Democrats are more likely to say it, way over 50% of the Republicans currently enrolled and unenrolled [74%] say greater access is important for where they are going to attend college."

According to Crawford, the Gallup-Lumina study is broadly in line with the data uncovered by the "Indiana University Abortion Attitudes Project", a multi-year study, for which he and Kristen Jozkowski, as well as William L. Yarber (endowed professor of sexual health, School of Public Health, Kinsey Institute at IU), are co-principal investigators.

"Over the several waves of data collection, 57-60% of participants said they disagreed with *Roe v Wade* being overturned," said Crawford.

While activists on one side want to ban all abortions and on the other side want few if any restrictions on abortion, the large majority of the people they've surveyed over years fall in the middle.

"In some scenarios they are okay with abortion; in some scenarios they don't like it. But what we consistently have found is that people want some type of access. And, so I think what's happening in some of these states that are going far right and getting rid of all access is that people may push back. That's what we saw in the Kansas referendum [last November] when people [in a Republican state] voted to keep some state constitutional protections for abortion."

A broader problem of enrolment decline

The Gallup-Lumina findings could exacerbate problems that were manifesting before the COVID-19 pandemic that caused enrolment to drop by 2.6% in 2020 and another 2.5% in 2021 – a cumulative decline of almost one million students. Nationwide, between 2017 and 2019, enrolment had fallen by 700,000 students, meaning that in 2022 there were 1,794,209 fewer college and university students enrolled in American higher education than in 2017.

While the Southern states saw less of a decline than did the Northeast, which has seen a drop in its total population while the southern states have grown, the Southern states have almost 6% fewer students enrolled now than they did in 2017. If students were to act on the views expressed in the Gallup-Lumina survey, states with restrictive reproductive health legal regimes could face accelerating declining enrolments.

"Enrolment has been dropping for the last decade. And the fact that some students won't consider enrolling in a state that does not allow reproductive health is going to be a huge problem for some states; it's going to be a huge problem for their enrolment numbers," Brown told *University World News*.

Especially vulnerable are mid-level state universities, Brown said. Prestige schools like the University of Texas at Austin will be able to replace students who decide against going there because of Texas' laws on reproductive health. But it's not going to be easy for other schools to replace these students in the face of overall decreasing enrolments.

While Crawford agrees with Brown, he adds that it is possible that some students who fall into the 15% of students who do not favour more liberal abortion legal regimes might choose to go to states, like Wisconsin, which restrict abortion. However, the sheer numbers in the 85% who favour more liberal access means that it's likely that more academically strong students may decide against going to college or university in states like Wisconsin, Texas or Florida.

This means that there is a real possibility that these states risk losing quality university candidates. It's something that university officials are going to have to consider, he said.

Lessons for others

Although both the context and legal manoeuvres in the decades' long abortion debate are unique to the United States, both Brown and Crawford think that the debate holds lessons for other countries.

According to Brown, both politicians and university leaders outside the US should look at the Gallup-Lumina findings as a cautionary tale for what happens when policies that take people's rights away are put in place.

"It is a good lesson to pay attention to the youth in the US and activist groups," she said "and pay attention to what's happening around them if they want to ensure the success of students, especially underrepresented students".

Crawford concluded by drawing attention to the fact that when the SCOTUS decided *Dobbs*, one justice (Kavanaugh) said that for the SCOTUS the abortion question was settled because it had been returned to the states. But that's not how it is taking shape as states criminalise abortion.

"Now people are going to have to grapple with how they feel about knowing that doctors might be put in jail or pregnant people might be put in jail. I think we're going to see this issue continue to evolve in the sense of how people grapple with the reality of what it means for abortion to be illegal in many places.

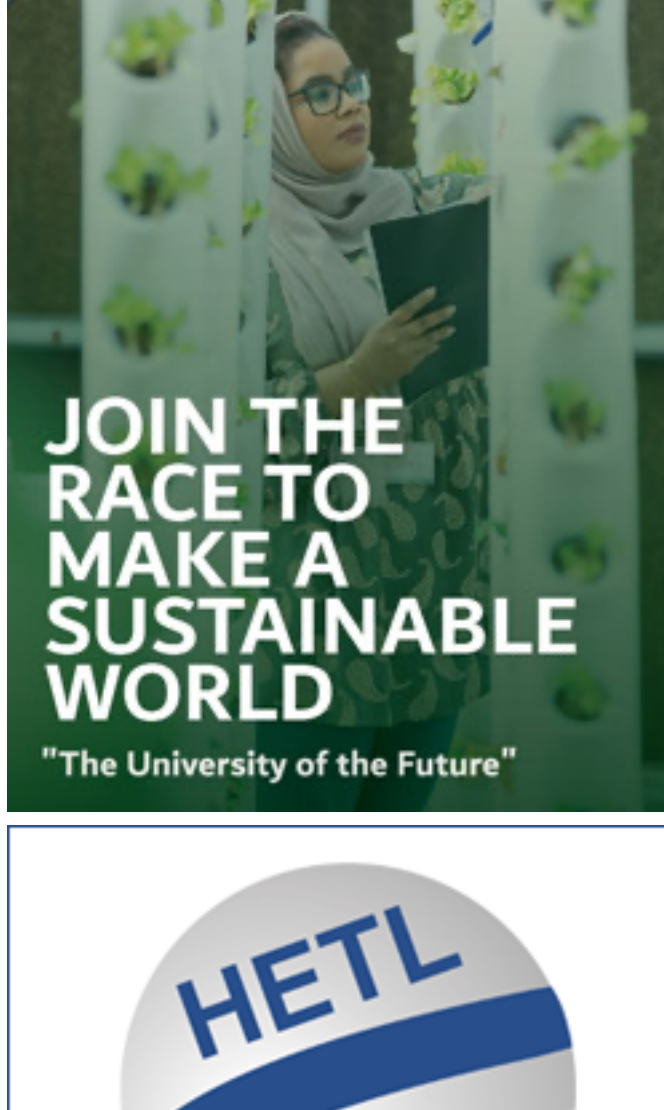
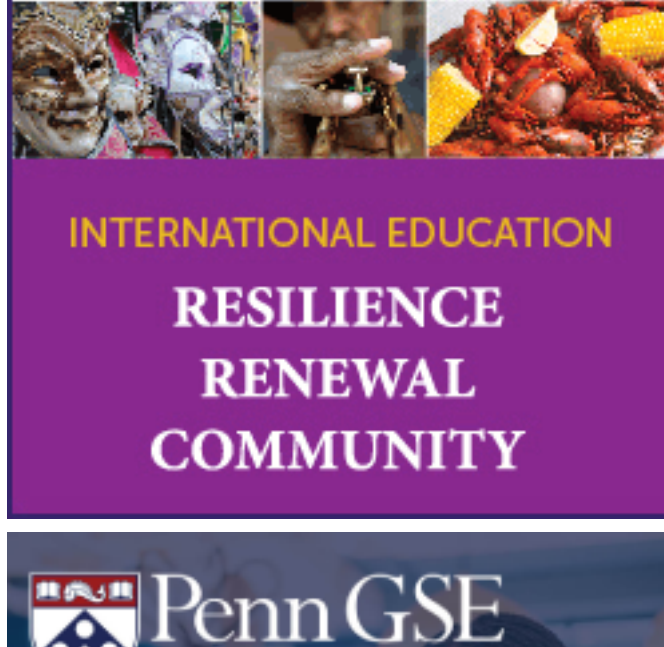
"I think this is going to be a long process in terms of seeing how abortion access shifts in the US as more and more state rulings [and in some cases lower federal courts] come out. The takeaway is that this is a far from settled issue that has already arisen, in the case involving Mifepristone, returned to the Supreme Court in Washington."

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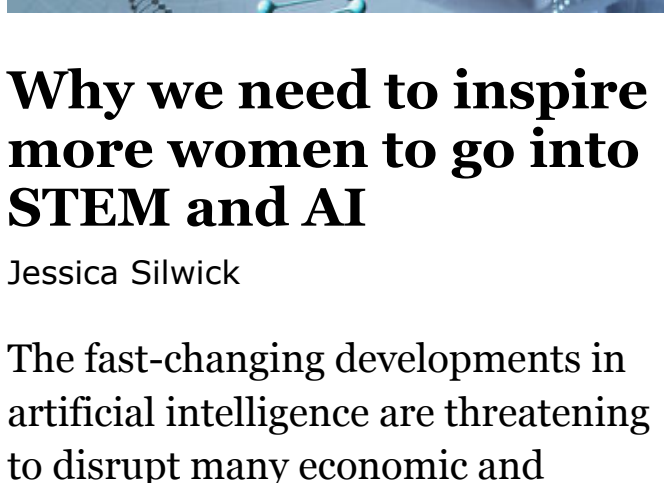
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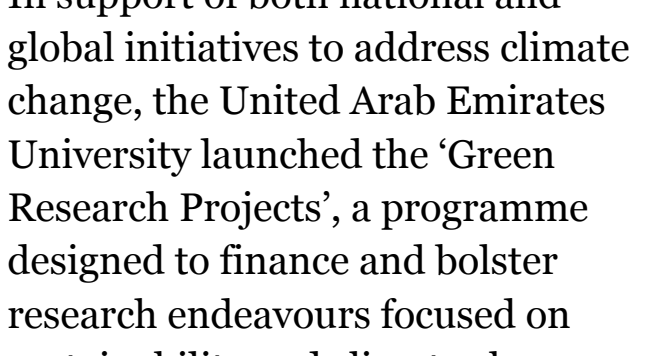


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Jessica Silwick

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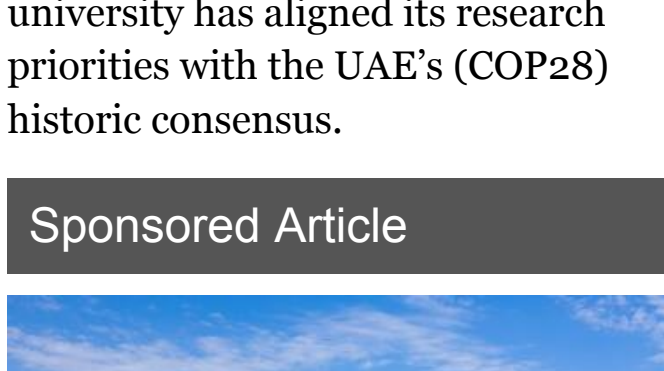


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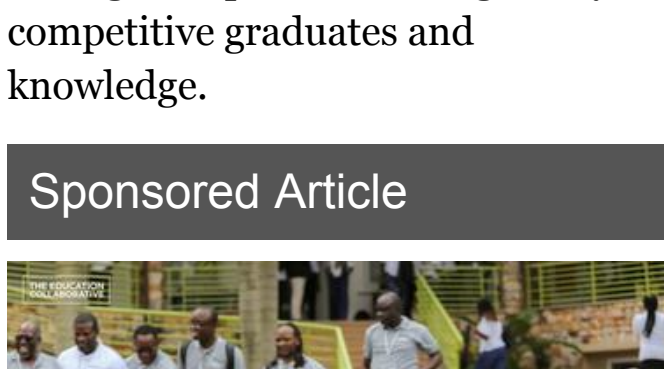


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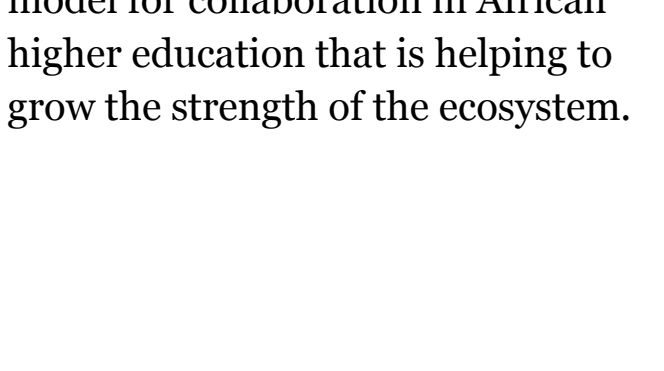


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