

The economics of prettiness: more attractive women get higher grades



Women who are conventionally attractive have an advantage in college — and it continues later in life, according to [research from two economists](#) at the Metropolitan State University of Denver.

The researchers, Rey Hernández-Julián and Christina Peters, [studied data on students enrolled from](#) 2006 to 2011 at their university, a public university that takes all students who want to attend. The typical student at the university is 28 years old.

In a real-world version of the early-internet phenomenon Hot or Not, volunteers were asked to look at students' ID card photos and rate their attractiveness on a scale from 1 to 10. Volunteers, who weren't from within the university, were allowed to skip a photo if it was of someone they knew.

The researchers explained they picked a 10-point scale because it leaves open the possibility that someone could become more attractive with a better haircut or new clothes — something that a 5-point scale seemed too rigid to allow. (Attractiveness rating is, apparently, a very exact science.)

The researchers then matched the attractiveness scores with students' grades.

They found that being considered unattractive has consequences in the classroom — but only for women. The least attractive women students earned lower grades in traditional courses, and the effect was significant even after controlling for test scores.

In online classes, attractive female students performed worse than expected given their other grades, suggesting that their looks were giving them a lift in regular classes.

For men, appearance didn't matter at all.

College is training for the real world of appearance discrimination



(Pascal Le Segretain/Getty Images For Paramount Pictures)

There are benefits to being really, really, ridiculously good-looking.

College is just the beginning. Discrimination based on looks lasts a lifetime, and it's so well known that it has two nicknames: "the beauty premium," for people considered attractive, and "the plainness penalty," for those who aren't.

One [study](#) found that attractiveness didn't make a difference for well-qualified candidates but offered an extra boost to women with mediocre résumés.

People with below-average looks earn \$140,000 less during their lifetime, the

economist Daniel Hamermesh [estimated](#) in a 2011 book, *Beauty Pays*.

The Metropolitan State study suggests that these benefits are based on looks alone — not on other traits that might correlate with appearance, such as being detail-oriented or confident. Otherwise, an attractive student would perform equally well in in-person and online courses.

And the researchers argue the benefit might start in college, because professors might lavish attention on more attractive students while ignoring the least attractive.

Teachers' expectations for their students can shape eventual outcomes, a phenomenon called the "[Pygmalion effect](#)" — named, fittingly, after a George Bernard Shaw [play](#) about a male professor teaching a woman to be more ladylike.

Go deeper:

- Attractive students are also [more likely than average](#) to earn a four-year degree.
- The case for a law banning [discrimination based on attractiveness](#).
- The one pursuit where being ugly is an advantage? Robbery, [according to Hamermesh](#).